

Forgotten Realms

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Realms of the Dead

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Pieces

Richard Lee Byers

Thay

11 Mirtul, the Year of the Halflings'Lament (1386DR)

The dead man had no face. His killer had cut or clawed it to shreds.

Bareris Anskuld looked down at the corpse with a sense of frustration. He'd spent a tenday finding his way to this earthquake-damaged house with its uneven floors and cracks running up the walls, and now it appeared he'd arrived too late. "Is that Urmas Sethdem?" Mirror asked. The ghost, who had the unsettling habit of taking on the appearance of anyone who happened to be nearby, currently looked like a shadowy, wavering caricature of Bareris himself, with a lanky frame and long yellow hair. Or rather, he resembled a parody of his friend's disguise. Now that he too was undead, Bareris possessed bone white hair and skin, and eyes black as midnight. But when he wished it, bardic magic lent him the appearance of a living man. "I assume it's Urmas," he said. "This is supposed to be his home. Although that raises an interesting point. If you don't want a body identified, why not remove it from the place where it lived?"

"For some reason, that wasn't practical." Mirror's face began to flow, turning into the corpse's countenance of naked bone and tattered flesh. "So the murderer simply did what he could."

"I suppose." Bareris kneeled beside the body. Flies buzzed up from it. Noting the color, he took hold of one of the bluish hands and tried to bend the arm to which it attached. The limb was stiff. "He's been dead for a while."

"So there's not much hope of catching up to the killer."

“Not unless the victim himself puts us on the right track.” Bareris stood up and unslung the wood and leather harp case from his back.

“Necromancy?” Mirror asked.

“If I can manage it.”

Mirror scowled. In life, he’d been a knight pledged to one of the gods of light, and he disliked black magic. But he’d seen his allies employ far worse tactics over the course of the past ten years. The sorcerer lords who’d battled for control of Thay had raised up whole armies of devils and undead and laid waste to the land itself to accomplish their ends. “Just be careful,” he said. “And don’t hold the poor soul any longer than necessary.”

“Right,” Bareris said. He made sure the small harp was in tune, then stroked a glissando from the wire strings.

He knew songs that allowed him to converse with animals and even plants. The one he now improvised was similar in structure. But he played it in a minor key and composed verses devised to breach the wall between worlds and catch a spirit in a net of compulsion. He’d learned some of the words of power listening to true necromancers work their spells. Others simply came to him as he focused his mind on the unnatural and transgressive.

The sparsely furnished room grew colder and darker. The shadows at the edges of his vision squirmed and twitched. The clamor of the city beyond the window faded until his cruel, bleak song seemed like the only sound in the world.

I.

^ The corpse jerked and sucked in a ragged breath. | Bareris sang to the end of a stanza, bringing the spell to a K proper close so the magic wouldn't run wild. 1 The body sat up. Its glazed eyes, flattened by a loss of fluid, shifted back and forth.

"Are you Urmas Sethdem?" Bareris asked. The corpse clumsily drew itself to its feet. "Are you Urmas?" Bareris repeated.

"We don't mean you any harm," Mirror said. "We'll free you as soon as you answer our questions, and avenge your murder if we can."

The body just stared. A maggot crawled from its mouth onto what little remained of its lower lip.

"Speak," Bareris said. "I command the dead in dead Velsharoon's name."

"Was Urmas." The dead man's voice was clogged and garbled. ;. "Just pieces now. Like everything in pieces." He laughed. It sounded like rocks grinding together. "Who killed you?" Bareris asked. "A shadow. Me. Everybody." "I don't understand." Urmas laughed again. "Me, either."

"We want to join your fellowship. The circle of those who : stand against Szass Tarn. To whom did you report?" Urmas shook his head. "No. Not a traitor." "It won't be a betrayal," Mirror said. "We want to help." "Tell me," Bareris said. "Or I'll send you to the Abyss to wander till something catches you." He struck a discord from "Ś. the harp, and the jangling sound rocked the dead man backward. "Chon Vrael," Urmas mumbled.

"I've heard that name," Bareris said. "A priest of Kossuth, isn't he?"

“Fire,” said Urmas. It looked as though he was trying to smirk,

though his torn lips couldn’t really manage it. “Burn you up.”

“I told you,” Mirror said, “we’re your friends.”

“No tricks,” growled Urmas. “No traitor!” He raised his hands and lurched at Bareris.

The dead man was awkward, but his sudden aggression caught Bareris by surprise. Urmas slammed into him, knocked him onto his back, and dropped on top of him.

The corpse seized Bareris’s throat with one hand and clawed for his eyes with the other. Glad that he no longer needed to breathe, Bareris caught Urmas by the wrist and strained to hold his groping fingers away from his face.

Meanwhile, Mirror reverted to an approximation of the form he’d worn in life, a gaunt warrior in a hauberk, with a melancholy face and drooping mustachios. A broadsword appeared in his hand and he thrust it at Urmas’s back. Insubstantial as the knight who wielded it, the blade plunged in without resistance.

Urmas’s body lit up from the inside as Mirror poured sacred power through the weapon. In life, he’d possessed the ability to channel the might of his god, and somehow, he still did, despite the fact that the force was poison to the undead. It stung Bareris a little even though his comrade hadn’t directed it at him.

Urmas exploded, spattering Bareris with chunks of smoking, semisolid flesh and chips of bone.

“Are you all right?” Mirror asked.

“Yes.” Bareris climbed to his feet, examined his harp and verified that it too was intact. He carefully wiped the filth from it before making a desultory attempt to brush himself off.

The hint of a smile played across Mirror’s shadowy lips.

Bareris recognized why his comrade found his besmirched appearance amusing, but he couldn’t share the emotion. He hadn’t found anything funny since the night his beloved Tammith died her final death, and he himself passed from life into undeath.

“That wasn’t like when we’ve watched necromancers interrogate the dead,” he said. “And I don’t think it was because I botched the magic.”

“I agree.” said Mirror, back to his usual somber self. “Urmas said he was ‘just pieces,’ and it really did seem that his soul was damaged and in pain.”

“Because of the way he died?”

Mirror shrugged, and his form became blurry. “It seems like a good guess, but who knows?”

“Well, he didn’t give us everything we wanted, but he did give us Chon Vrael. Let’s go find the man.”

Bareris chanted words of command, and the same illusion that made him look as he had in life adjusted to mask the fresh stains on his person. Meanwhile. Mirror faded to a streak of nearly imperceptible visual distortion, like a warning of impending headache. When they both were ready, they headed back out into the teeming, benighted

streets of Amruthar, or, as people had begun to call it.
Burning Amruthar.

As the one free city in Thay, Amruthar had been a haven for refugees displaced by a decade of civil war. That alone had taxed its resources to the breaking point, and then came the magical disaster tailed the Spcllpl.igue. Earthquakes tumbled keeps and towers. The earth split, and houses spilled into the glowing lava flowing through the chasms.

By rights, that final calamity should have left the metropolis uninhabitable, but somehow, it endured. Perhaps because its people had nowhere else to go.

The crowds were predominantly human, but there were plenty of tusked, pig-faced ores; tall, shaggy gnolls cackling their piercing laughs; and stunted, bandy-legged goblins wandering around as well. Only the undead, who had the run of every other Thayan town, were conspicuous by their absence.

The air smelled of smoke and sulfur, and stung Bareris's eyes.

A ircmor shook the ground and sent pebbles rattling over the edge of a gaping zigzag fissure in (he ground. Beggars cried for alms, and vendors hawked their wares. A shrill cry cut through the din as someone fell prey to violence.

Despite the press, and the rubble obstructing the way, Bareris and Mirror made reasonably good time crossing the city. People felt an instinctive urge to get out of a ghost's way even when they didn't realize it was there.

From what Bareris understood, Chon Vrael had attained a high rank in the hierarchy of the Church of Kossuth. Had he chosen, he could have lived and worked in luxury, in the

black ziggurat at the center of the city. Instead, he'd established a temple of his own. Its most prominent features were the tiers of seating hacked into the upper wall of one of the chasms, and the walkway projecting halfway out over the bright, churning magma far below.

Wreathed in leaping magical flame, a basalt altar sat at the end of the spur, and a surprisingly young man in red and yellow robes stood behind it. Like most Thayans of aristocratic birth, he was tall, slender, and shaved his head, and, like other firewalkers Bareris had known, had shiny burn scars spotting his fair complexion. By the looks of it, he was a gifted orator. The worshipers in the makeshift amphitheater were giving him their undivided attention.

"In the days to come," Chon Vrael said, "you will hear many lies." Enchantment, or some trick of acoustics, made the words carry all the way to the uppermost tier.

"People will tell you Amruthar can no longer survive as a free city. That you have no choice but to submit yourselves, your wives, and your children to the mastery of the foulest horrors imaginable. Of ghouls, vampires, and wraiths, who will feast on their flesh and blood and very souls.

"The liars will claim that the Firelord, who has always loved and protected Amruthar, who preserved us through all the

dangers of the War of the Zulkirs and the Spellplague, is no true god at all.

"They'll assure you that he has no warrior priests left in Thay. That all the Burning Braziers died or fled away across the sea, and those of us who remain are only too eager to surrender. To give up you, our home, and our beliefs. To proclaim Szass Tarn the rightful ruler of Amruthar, and Kossuth a mere exarch subordinate to Bane.

“But don’t believe it! Don’t believe any of it! We mean to fight, and the Lord of Flame will fight with us! The only question is: will you stand with us too?”

His audience roared that they would. Chon Vrael smiled, raised his arms, and the fire burning around the altar leaped and swelled to cover him as well.

As a bard and thus an orator himself. Bareris perceived the force of Chon Vrael’s eloquence, but an appeal to hope, love, and faith failed to stir him. Had the priest opted to speak of hate and revenge, then he might have experienced an impulse to cheer with the rest.

But whatever he did or didn’t feel, the important thing was that he was now reasonably certain that Urmas’s spirit hadn’t sent him astray. He waited for the ceremony to conclude, then he climbed down the tiers. Mirror followed as a sense of localized wrongness at his back.

Chon Vrael stood at the point where the walkway met the lowest bench. Jabbering parishioners surrounded him. As before, some made way for Mirror without knowing why. Bareris induced others to clear a path by saying, “Excuse me,” and infusing the words with a touch of bardic magic.

Chon Vrael watched him approach with curiosity in his light gray eyes. “We haven’t met before,” he said. When he wasn’t preaching, his baritone voice sounded higher, breathier, and younger, a better match for his callow face.

“No,” Bareris said, “but it’s important we talk in private. Your life may be in danger.”

“I’m sure it is,” replied the priest, “but I doubt my enemies feel threatened enough to attack me in the midst of a

gathering of the faithful. Let me finish blessing and healing those who want it, and then we'll go inside the temple."

So Bareris waited with impatience gnawing at his nerves. Finally the gathering broke up, and Chon Vrael conducted him and the still-invisible Mirror into the cavernous building across the street from the top of the amphitheater. The priest and his acolytes had set up altars and icons, lit devotional fires, hung crimson and orange banners from the rafters, and, all in all, done a fair job of turning the place into a shrine, although faded signs, numbers, tally marks, and even obscene graffiti chalked on the walls still hinted at its previous existence as an indoor marketplace.

A sentry stood watch near the primary altar. He was twice as tall as Bareris, but so burly, he looked squat. He sported a bushy copper-colored beard and carried an enormous greatsword sheathed on his back.

Bareris had heard that a company of fire giants served in the black ziggurat. Evidently at least one of them had opted to follow Chon Vrael when he left to establish his own house of worship.

The priest smiled and indicated the hulking guard with a wave of his hand. "You see, even when not in a crowd, I might not be so easy to kill."

"Or maybe you would," Bareris replied. "There's an invisible warrior standing within sword reach of you, and neither you nor your bodyguard even noticed."

Chon Vrael studied Bareris's face, decided he wasn't joking, and stepped backward. His hand darted inside his robe and pulled out a wavy-edged dagger. The blade burst into hissing flame. "Who are you?"

"Allies," said Bareris, "if you'll have us. My friend will show himself now. and I'll reveal my true appearance." He sang three descending notes and discarded his mask of illusion. Currently a murky reflection of Chon Vrael. burning knife and all. Mirror wavered into view.

"You're undead!" spat the priest. The giant drew his sword and it too burst into flame.

"Yes," Mirror said. "But even so, we're the necromancers' enemies. We've fought them since the day the war began. This is Bareris Anskuld, and people call me Mirror. Maybe you've heard of us."

Chon Vrael frowned. "Anskuld was a living man, and both he and the ghost abandoned Thay along with the zulkirs."

"I lost my life on the Alamber Sea." Bareris said, "and we came back to continue the fight. Now, please, tell the giant to stand down. We don't want to hurt him, or you."

Chon Vrael hesitated, then he raised his hand. The huge guard stopped advancing. "What do you want?" the cleric asked.

"To join forces with the other rebels who fight Szass Tarn," Bareris said. "Everyone knows that several such bands operate out of Amruthar, and considering that you openly speak out against him, surely you are, at the very least, in communication with them."

"But here's what's important now," Mirror said. "Someone murdered your follower, Urmas Sethdem. It's possible that Szass Tarn's agents in Amruthar are moving to kill everyone who stands against him. You have to protect yourself and warn your friends so they can do the same."

Chon Vrael blinked. "By the Black Flame! Poor Urmas! Come with me."

He led them to a doorway, then down a flight of stairs. The giant brought up the rear, negotiating a space too small for him with a fair amount of difficulty.

Lit by a single hanging lantern, with arched doorways opening on blackness, the spacious cellar at the bottom of the steps looked like a fit place for plotting sabotage and assassination. Trying to determine why Chon Vrael wanted him and Mirror down there, Bareris peered around.

Chon Vrael lunged forward, distancing himself from his visitors and catching Bareris by surprise. The priest spun around, slashed the burning dagger through the air, and snarled a word of command.

Flame roared up from the floor under Bareris's feet. He reeled in agony, and Mirror convulsed, the divine fire burning his incorporeal form like paper.

Bareris staggered out of the blaze to find the blurry mass of the giant planted right in front of him. The huge warrior had his sword cocked back for a horizontal cut, and, spastic and half blind as he was, Bareris had no hope of defending himself.

But Chon Vrael snapped, "I want him taken prisoner." And the giant simply grabbed Bareris with one enormous hand and tossed him back into the fire.

Where he burned until pain was the only thing in the world. Then the flames pulled back from the huddled, blackened husk he had become to surround him like a cage. Mirror survived, too, but only as the vaguest intimation of hovering presence.

“It wasn’t a bad idea,” said Chon Vrael, a sneer in his voice, “but you needed a better story. Urmas, come out here and show our guests where their scheme went wrong.”

A figure emerged from one of the doorways. With his eyes seared, peering through leaping flame, Bareris only saw a shadow. But he assumed that the newcomer looked like the real Urmas had in life.

“Who are they?” the impostor asked.

“Assassins,” said Chon Vrael, “who told an alarming tale to put Rangdor and me off our guard.” Evidently Rangdor was the

giant. “Fortunately, it was obvious it was a lie, because I knew you were alive and well, waiting to speak with me.”

Bareris tried to explain, but the pain howling through his charred Hcsh made speech impossible.

“So it’s finally happening,” the false Urmas said. “Szass Tarn’s trying to get rid of you.”

“Or else it’s Thola Mupret.” the firewalker said.

Urmas shook his head. “I can’t believe that any high priestess of Kossuth, even Amruthar’s, would stoop to employing undead.”

“We already know that she’d do anything, including surrendering the city to a lich, to cling to her office. And she might choose to send a revenant and a ghost after me precisely because many would think her incapable of that particular treachery.”

“I guess,” Urmas said. “What happens now?”

“Well, it’s not enough for the three of us to stand around and speculate. We have to find out for sure what’s going on. Which means wringing some answers out of our prisoners.”

Urmas grunted.

“Don’t you think I’m up to the job?” Chon Vrael sounded offended. “The trap I had prepared caught them handily enough.”

“I think you have few equals when it comes to smiting and blasting the undead. But commanding them is a different matter, and unless I’m mistaken, not a task you’ve ever attempted. Some of your fellow leaders are probably more experienced. Or, they have followers who are. I suggest you call a meeting.”

Chon Vrael hesitated. “It’s an option, I suppose.”

“A good one,” the impostor insisted. Despite the agony disordering his senses, Bareris, a master of magical persuasion and coercion in his own right, abruptly discerned the charge of psychic force infusing the words. Unfortunately, Chon Vrael and Rangdor seemed oblivious.

Bareris struggled to warn them. He still couldn’t make a sound.

“You’re right,” Chon Vrael said. “For all we know, every one of us is in danger. I’ll summon them.”

“Then I guess it’s time for me to clear out,” said Urmas. Bareris felt a fresh pulse of power in his voice.

Chon Vrael stood quiet for two or three heartbeats. Then: “No. One thing we know for sure is that our enemies have identified you, so it isn’t safe for you to go home. Besides,

you've proved yourself, and that means it's time you learned more about our friends. It will make you more useful to the cause."

"I'll pray for the strength to justify your trust."

"Do it now if you like. I have to perform a ritual to contact the others, and Rangdor can keep an eye on the prisoners."

Urmas climbed back upstairs, to worship among the icons and sacred fires, or so he'd claimed. Chon Vrael disappeared through one of the arches. Rangdor stood and glowered through the flames at Bareris for a while, then moved off and sat down on the floor with his back against a wall.

That was the closest approximation to privacy that Bareris and Mirror were likely to get. If they were still capable of doing anything to help themselves, this was the time to try.

It didn't look like the ghost was able. Kossuth's power had nearly burned him from existence, and until he had time to recover, he might not even be aware of his surroundings.

Bareris struggled to whisper words to tap into the fountain-head of dark power that gave rise to undcath. Though the force was toxic to anything truly alive, it was vitality to an unnatural being like himself.

But still, pain silenced him and so robbed him of his magic.

He tried to ignore the agony. To focus past it. That proved to be impossible.

Was it really going to end like this? Would he perish here in this crypt, or linger on as a maimed, helpless captive, without ever achieving even the tiniest measure of revenge?

Rage and hatred, defiance and despair, roared up inside him. and then a curious thing happened. A part of him detached from them, and, unable to feel them any longer, contemplated the piece of him that did as if it were an actor declaiming and gesticulating on a stage.

After her rebirth as a vampire. Tammith had tried to describe this dissociation to him. From time to time, an undead doubted the reality of his own passions, suspected that he only pretended to feel them in order to mask what would otherwise be the unbearable, aching emptiness of his condition. But until that moment, he hadn't understood.

It jolted his sanity and sense of self. He felt as if his mind was breaking apart, and prompted by some primal instinct more basic than emotion, strained to hold himself together. After he weathered the paroxysm, he realized that, appalling as it was, this sensation of psychic division and falsity could be useful.

Because if nothing inside him was authentic, that meant the pain wasn't real, either.

He tried whispering. At first, nothing happened, and it occurred to him that sidestepping agony wouldn't help him if the fire had so damaged his anatomy as to render speech impossible. But then the words started coming.

Unfortunately, they were garbled, like the words of the real Urmas's mangled corpse had been. Useless. He strained to articulate with the clarity and precision required for spellcasting despite the handicap of his charred lips and throat.

Until finally the power flowed, and the pain faded. Shapes became clearer. Crisp black bits of him flaked away as pale new flesh formed underneath. Still keeping a casual sort of

watch while sitting against the wall, Rangdor didn't appear to notice anything amiss.

When he felt more or less restored, Bareris took stock of himself as best he could while still lying curled up on his side.

His harp and brigandine had burned to uselessness along with his clothing. His enchanted hand-and-a-half sword seemed to have survived.

He considered trying to heal Mirror as he'd healed himself, but decided against it. The phantom was a paradox of light and dark energies bound together, and he feared upsetting the balance. Better to let him recover in his own time.

Even though it meant Bareris would have to escape the cage of fire by himself.

Had it been natural flame, he would simply have plunged through and trusted to speed to protect him. But he suspected that Chon Vrael's conjured blaze might cling to him like glue, or even harden into solidity to contain him, and if so, he'd have to answer magic with magic.

Wishing he still had a musical instrument to aid his spellcasting, he crooned under his breath. If it worked, the magic would shift him several paces to the outside of his burning prison.

The world exploded into motes and streaks of light, then instantly reformed—with hot, crackling flame still leaping on every side. His location hadn't changed.

Apparently the ring of flame wouldn't let him slip by. So the only hope was to extinguish it.

He sang a new song. At first he kept it soft and continued to lie on his side, but it soon became apparent that wasn't good enough. The flames burned as bright as ever.

Shedding black flakes, he swarmed to his feet. He stood straight and sang loud, his posture and volume both conveying force and augmenting the innate power of his counterspell, thus pouring strength into an assault intended to tear Chon Vrael's enchantment apart.

Rangdor could scarcely miss that. He jumped up, drew his sword, and shouted, "Master!"

Concentrating fiercely, Bareris hammered at his prison with every iota of his willpower. For a heartbeat, the flames in front of him fell. But then they shot up just as high and hungry as before, nor could he induce them to gutter again.

He realized he couldn't break Chon Vrael's enchantment. The firewalker had clearly lavished too much time and power on this particular trap.

Ambling, making it plain he saw no need for haste, Chon Vrael approached with Rangdor lumbering behind him. "I see you managed to restore yourself," the cleric said. "I wonder, if I have the fire clutch you like a fist and burn you all over again, will you find the strength to do it a second time?"

Bareris locked eyes with Chon Vrael through the yellow blur of the flames. "If your intention is to question me, then you need me capable of speech."

"Maybe, maybe not. From what I understand, a necromancer can tease speech from a naked skull. But I'm willing to postpone burning you if you leave off trying to escape."

“Listen to me: I don’t know exactly who or what came to see you today, but it’s not Urmas Sethdem. I’ve seen the real Urmas’s corpse and spoken to his ghost. His killer is impersonating him. He even devoured bits of his mind to make his masquerade more convincing.” That was why the spirit had been a demented, damaged thing.

“Nonsense,” Chon Vrael said.

“Remember right after you caught Mirror and me, when the impostor came into this vault. You referred to ‘guests,’ and he wasn’t confused. But at that point, Mirror was invisible. Would the real Urmas have been capable of perceiving him?”

Chon Vrael hesitated then snorted. “He understands that our enemies employ invisible spirits, and so had no difficulty drawing the proper conclusion.”

“I’m telling you, he’s a killer with supernatural abilities sent to slaughtet you and your allies, and sad to say, you, Mirror, and

I have played right into his hands. Normally, it wouldn’t be easy to ferret out all the groups who oppose Szass Tarn, because there arc several operating more or less independently. But he used psychic domination to convince you to gather everyone together, and when your comrades arrive, he’ll do his best to kill you all.”

Chon Vrael laughed. “Each of your lies is more preposterous than the last.”

“You’re thinking even if Urmas is an enemy, there’s only one of him. But I guarantee you, he has accomplices lurking close at hand, or some other means of attacking.”

“Instead of babbling onward in this vein, why don’t you tell the truth and spare yourself the pain of torture? I promise that afterward, I’ll give you and the ghost a more merciful end than you deserve.”

Bareris sighed. “You hate the undead, don’t you, Firewalker? Combined with the impostor’s lingering influence, it’s why you won’t even consider the possibility that I might be telling the truth.”

“Well, since you mention it, I didn’t always live in Amruthar. My family had an estate in Tytatueros. But my mother and I had to flee with only the clothes on our backs after Szass Tarn’s zombies overran our lands and tore my father and brother to pieces. So yes, I suppose it’s fair to say I dislike your kind a little.”

“Don’t you see, that’s why your enemies would never send undead agents to trick you. At least, not undead agents who’d freely disclose their true natures. Mirror and I didn’t know about your past, but Szass Tarn and Thola Mupret surely do.”

Chon Vrael stood quietly for several moments. Long enough for Rangdor to peer down at him quizzically, and Bareris to feel a pang of hope. Then the priest said, “Stick to your lies, then. I’ll enjoy hearing you scream.” He turned on his heel and stalked away.

Bareris scowled and wished he’d attempted to impose his own subtle coercion on Chon Vrael. But the results of such a ploy

were always uncertain, especially when someone else had already tampered with the target’s mind. And if Chon Vrael had resisted, and afterward realized his will had been under

attack, that surely would have made it impossible to gain his trust.

But Bareris had failed to gain it anyway, and it now appeared that his only chance was to subvert the will of Rangdor, who'd lingered near his cage to keep a better watch on him.

"Giant," he said. "If you respect Chon Vrael, or feel devotion to his cause, then help me save him from the consequences of his blindness." Stressing certain syllables and speaking with a particular cadence, he threaded magic through the words. But he articulated the necessary structure with such subtlety that no one but another spellcaster would have noticed. "Set me free."

Rangdor's coarse features went slack. He rubbed his temple with his fingertips like he was trying to massage away a strange sensation.

But then he glared. "No! You can't slither into my head, spook, and I'll split you in two if you try again!"

Bareris wondered if the ring of fire seared the strength from any spell a prisoner tried to cast through it, or if Lady Luck had simply turned her back on him. Either way, this new trick had failed just like the others.

He turned to regard the aching sense of absence that was Mirror. "If you can hear me," he murmured, "heal yourself. Come back. I need you."

The ghost remained as inert, as virtually nonexistent, as before.

Shortly thereafter, the resistance leaders and their lieutenants n to arrive, a few skulking down the stairs with

an exaggerated conspiratorial air that might have been humorous in other circumstances. Clad in brocade and damask, some were plainly aristocrats or prosperous merchants. Jewels gleamed on their fingers and in the hilts of their swords. Others dressed in wool

and linen, and their callused hands were grimy from the day's toil.

Smiling, Urmas followed the last of them down.

They all stood and palavered with Chon Vrael for a while. Then they approached the circle of flame, and a wizard came to stand with the firewalker at the front of the pack. Judging from his red robe and skull-shaped ivory rings and amulet, he was evidently one of the few initiates of the Order of Necromancy who hadn't backed Szass Tarn in his bid to become sole master of Thay. Gray mold spotted his hairless, saturnine features and tattooed, long-fingered hands. Perhaps the fungus enhanced his sense of identification with the dead.

"Well, well," said the magus, projecting the air of smug, malicious superiority characteristic of Red Wizards, "what have we here?"

"I really am Bareris Anskuld," the bard replied, "and this is Mirror. And all of you truly are in danger, and nearly out of time to prepare for the attack to come."

"The same lies as before," Chon Vrael said. "Make him tell the truth."

"Consider it done." The necromancer raised an intricately carved white staff fashioned from the bone of some colossal creature and ostentatiously planted it in front of him. He chanted words of command, and the implement gleamed

like someone was playing a light up and down its length. Voices whispered from empty air, and one man's nose began to bleed. The conspirators muttered in discomfort.

Bareris felt power prying at his psyche. His instinct was to resist, to sing a counterspell that would wither the strength from his assailant's magic or even turn it back on him. But it occurred to him that if he allowed the necromancer to shackle his will, then surely afterward, these idiots would have no choice but to finally believe what he had to say.

And so, hating it, he opened his mind to his attacker as he'd once allowed his teachers in to help him develop the modes of thought necessary for bardic magic. As before, he seemed to divide into two Barerises, one numb and compliant, the other alert but a mere observer.

"Who are you?" the necromancer asked.

"Bareris Anskuld."

Some of the onlookers murmured in surprise. "When did you fall under Szass Tarn's control?" "Never. The only one controlling me is you." "Why did you come here?"

"To join forces with you. and warn you that the man or creature impersonating Urmas Sethdem means to kill you."

The wizard turned to Chon Vrael. "He seems to be telling the truth."

The fire priest shook his head. "No. It's a trick. A psychic defense to foil interrogations such as this."

"Anything's possible, I suppose. But what makes you so certain? And when you told us the story, why did you leave

out the fact that he accused your follower Sethdem specifically?”

Chon Vrael hesitated. “I’m not sure. I mean, given that the whole story was preposterous, why dwell on every detail?”

“Where is the man?” asked a noble with a short silvery cape, and a round steel buckler on his wrist.

Everybody looked around. At some point, Urmas had slipped away.

A mushy sliding noise came from the top of the stairs. “Is there another way out of here?” the necromancer asked. “No,” Chon Vrael said. “There are other vaults, but they’re dead ends.”

Then, sudden as a mudslide, the ulgurstasta plunged down the steps.

A Ik-maggotlike undead was a dwarf by the standards of its kind. Otherwise, its soft, slimy body notwithstanding, it

never could have fit down the stairwell. But it was still huge compared to the figures arrayed in front of it, Rangdor included, and it was impossible to imagine anyone conducting it through the teeming streets above. Urmas must have used sorcery to summon it.

“Back!” the necromancer shouted, and everyone retreated. But the aristocrat with the silvery cape moved too slowly, and one of the countless thin, almost invisible tendrils whipping around the ulgurstasta’s body slashed his face to the bone.

Its dozens of eyes glaring, its rows of stumpy legs working and clicking their bony spurs against the floor, the

ulgurstasta started to pursue. Then, still out of sight at the top of the stairs, Urmas yelled, "Skeletons!"

The creature vomited steaming, sizzling slime. Four skeletons rose from the mess, and, dripping with the viscous, fuming acid, scuttled toward Chon Vrael and his allies. The ulgurstasta heaved itself after them.

Shaking off shock and panic, some of the conspirators moved to engage the skeletons. Rangdor lunged to hold back the ulgurstasta, and at once the lashing filaments began to slice him apart. Standing his ground, he hacked at the creature with his fiery greatsword. Chon Vrael and the necromancer assailed the grublike thing with blasts of conjured flame and shadow, but it showed no signs of slowing down.

"Kill them all!" Urmas called. "Don't let anyone slip past you!"

Bareris had watched the first moments of the fight in a state of dazed passivity. But now the necromancer's enchantment fell away, and he realized he had to help the conspirators. But how, when he was still trapped inside the circle of flame?

He shouted repeatedly, the thunderous bellows hammering the concrete floor beneath his feet. At some point, Chon Vrael had probably sketched magical sigils on it. In a mystical sense, they were still there, even if they couldn't be seen anymore. And

maybe, if Bareris broke them apart, the flames they'd created would go out.

But no. The section of floor shattered, but the fire burned on. He racked his brains for yet another idea, then noticed that

with chunks of broken rock now tilted or resting in depressions, portions of the flame didn't leap as high as before.

Bareris was stronger than he'd been in life and knew a charm to make himself stronger still. Even though his prison was too cramped to permit a running start, maybe he could jump over one of low spots.

He chanted, and his muscles twitched as power flooded into them. He bent his legs, then sprang.

For a moment, he thought he was going to clear the flames completely. Then pain seared his left foot. He slammed down outside the ring with the extremity burning like a torch. As his intuition had warned, the fire clung to him like a leech.

Clenching himself against the pain, he chanted. The counterspell hadn't quelled the entire burning cage, but fortunately, it was strong enough to obliterate one detached piece of it. The flames died abruptly.

He scrambled up. His foot throbbed but held his weight. He looked around just in time to see the ulgurstasta seize Rangdor in its mouth. Rows of hooked teeth gnashed and ripped the giant to bloody pieces. The slimy creature swallowed most of them, although a few stray bits dropped to the floor.

It squished them as it advanced on the conspirators once more. The two surviving skeletons stalked beside it, outside the haze of whipping filaments, obeying Urmas's command to make sure no one got past it.

Bareris snatched his bastard sword from its charred scabbard. He sang, and the world exploded into hurtling sparks and smears. When it reformed an instant later, he

was standing on the stairs looking up at Urmas. The eyes in the impostor's

weak-chinned, jowly face widened in surprise.

"Call off your creatures," said Bareris, "or I'll kill you."

The assassin's false appearance fell away, revealing a thin, dark form with a tattered, inconstant outline that made it look like it was perpetually melting into smoke. Its face was the only part of it that seemed solid and steady, a white mask with a fixed, ferocious grin. Its hands were talons.

Bareris just had time to recognize it as the kind of undead called a visage. Then he felt a throb of headache as it tried to seize control of his will.

The psychic attack failed, but it made him falter like an unexpected slap in the face. Long, jointed claws poised to rend, the visage pounced at him.

Trained reflex made him snap his sword into line. The visage's own momentum flung it onto the point. It flailed in distress.

He jerked the blade free, then cut at it, meanwhile commencing a song intended to inflict it with pain and drain its strength. It kept trying to reach him with its talons. Fortunately, the superior reach afforded by his weapon made it difficult for it to close.

It stepped back and snarled a word Bareris had never heard before. Bat-winged snakes with black scales and luminous red eyes burst from its upraised hands and hurtled down the steps.

Bareris had never encountered a visage before. But he had studied accounts of them, as he'd tried to learn about all the creatures at Szass Tarn's command. Despite the indisputable fact that the master necromancer had given this particular servant the ability to summon the ulgurstasta when needed, as a general rule, visages didn't conjure other creatures to fight for them. They could, however, manufacture illusions.

So Bareris steeled himself to ignore the onrushing snakes, and found that he'd guessed right. When they swarmed on him

and struck at him, he couldn't even feel it. He swung his sword. It sheared into the body of the true threat lunging behind the cover of the blinding phantasm.

The flying serpents vanished, and the visage crumpled. Bareris pulled the sword out of its torso, cut into its head to make sure it really was finished, then turned and dashed to the foot of the steps.

Where he was disappointed. Even without the visage's will to spur them on, the ulgurstasta and its skeleton slaves were attacking as relentlessly as ever. Perhaps it was hungry.

But it was too small and thus too young to be intelligent. Now that it no longer had the visage to direct it, maybe Bareris could trick it.

While he tried to figure out how, Chon Vrael splashed it with a blast of crackling yellow flame. Maybe that attack actually caused it distress, for it replied by spewing slime from its mouth. The smoking, scaring muck splattered the firewalker, and he collapsed. The ulgurstasta's whipping tendrils cut his writhing form repeatedly as it crawled after the men who were still giving ground before it.

Then, a moment too late for Chon Vrael. Bareris saw an answer, or at least he hoped so. “Stop attacking it!” he called, infusing his voice with the magic of command.

“What?” the necromancer yelled. But he left off throwing spells, and, lacking ranged weapons, his fellow conspirators had no desire to engage the ulgurstasta because its tendrils cut them whenever they were close.

Bareris battered the creature with one shout after another. He doubted that his efforts were truly injuring it any more than the magical attacks that had come before. Every ulgurstasta was hellishly powerful, and it seemed likely that Szass Tarn had cast enchantments to render this particular specimen even more resistant to harm. But maybe it found the jolts unpleasant, and

since they were the only things currently stinging it, it and the skeletons turned to advance on the source.

Still bellowing, his shouts echoing, shaking the cellar, and making dust and grit fall from the ceiling, Bareris retreated until his back was against a wall. He hoped it was the right wall. That his sense of direction hadn’t failed him.

The ulgurstasta crawled close enough for its tendrils to start slashing him like razors. He couldn’t dodge. There were too many, and they were too difficult to see. He raised one arm to shield his eyes and tried to stay focused despite the punishment.

The creature opened its fanged mouth and lunged. Bareris spun himself out of the way, and it thudded against the wall. He drove the point of the bastard sword into the side of its head and began the same spell that had previously shifted him onto the staircase.

Though the weapon provided a point of connection, the ulgurstasta weighed more than anything he'd ever tried to transport before. Telling himself that if his sense of the layout of the cellar was correct—and it was, curse it, it had to be!—he only needed to carry it a few paces, he sang with all his might.

The world shattered, reformed, and he and the ulgurstasta were outside in the crude amphitheater above the projecting walkway, the perpetually burning altar, and the magma below. Seemingly undismayed, perhaps even oblivious to the sudden change in its surroundings, the creature jerked sideways. Bareris lost his grip on the sword and his balance too. He fell on his back across two benches with his feet higher than his head. Opening its jaws wide, the ulgurstasta heaved itself around in his direction.

He sang words of power. The tiers shattered into fragments, which immediately slid, rolled, and bounced down the slope beneath them.

The artificial avalanche scooped up both the ulgurstasta and Bareris and tumbled them along. Buffeted by chunks of scone, he chanted words that made him fall slowly. It was a way of buying time.

Time to grab hold of something that was still solid and hang on. But at first, all his scrabbling hands could find were pieces of stone in motion like himself. Finally, at the very point where the incline became a sheer drop, his fingers locked on bedrock that didn't crumble or slip when it took his weight. He clung with the dregs of his failing strength while the rocky cascade battered him.

When it finished rumbling past, he looked down in time to see the floundering, burning ulgurstasta sink below the

surface of the lava. Apparently even Szass Tarn couldn't make a beast completely indestructible.

Then Bareris clambered up the incline. He was halfway to the top when, sword in hand, Mirror sprang through the cracked, irregular surface. Most likely, when he'd recovered, he'd simply flown out the top of the fiery cage.

"It's over," Bareris rasped.

"It's over inside too," Mirror replied. "The skeletons weren't much of a threat by themselves. Are you all right?" "I'll mend. How many did we lose?"

"Only three, but one of them is Chon Vrael. I mean, he's still alive for the moment, and I'll do my best to heal him. But I doubt he's going to make it."

"Curse it." Bareris had a sense that the firewalker was important to their cause. He realized, moreover, that at some point, he'd come to respect him, perhaps because of his loathing for the undead. It was an antipathy Bareris shared, never mind that he himself was a walking corpse, and Mirror, a phantom from a long-forgotten age.

Mirror disappeared into the remains of the tiers. His magic all but exhausted, Bareris limped back into the temple.

By the time he descended to the cellar, the ghost was praying

over Chon Vrael. Ripples of golden light washed across the firewalker's body, but failed to ease the steaming, bubbling burns that riddled a goodly portion of it. Finally, Mirror said, "I'm sorry."

"It can't end like this," Chon Vrael croaked. It startled Bareris, who hadn't imagined the priest was still conscious, let alone capable of speech. "I have to oust Thola Mupret and make myself Eternal Flame. Otherwise, Szass Tarn will rule Amruthar as brutally as the rest of Thay. Kossuth showed me in a vision."

"I'm sorry," Mirror repeated. "I've done all I can."

"If you can't save my life," said Chon Vrael, "then make me like you."

"Even if we could," Bareris said, "it wouldn't help. Your church considers undead to be abominations. No one would accept you as a legitimate priest."

"They'll accept me," Chon Vrael said. "I'll make them accept me."

Bareris sensed someone at his back. He turned and saw it was the necromancer with his fungus-spotted skin and staff of bone.

"Could you bring him back?" Bareris asked. "With his faculties intact, I mean, not just as an automaton."

The Red Wizard looked surprisingly reluctant. Perhaps he regarded Chon Vrael as a genuine friend and knew what such a transformation would mean to him. But he gave a nod and said, "With your assistance, I probably can."

He left to fetch the necessary articles. By the time he returned, Chon Vrael was dead. Whispering spells, he infused the corpse with vapors and oils and wrapped it in strips of linen to preserve it. Then he and Bareris chanted over it together, drawing the fitewalker's soul, or some

twisted facsimile, out of the void and binding it to acid-eaten flesh and bone.

When they finished, Chon Vrael lifted his withered, bandaged hands before his eyes, then used them to examine his face by

touch. Then he made a ragged, lurching noise. Bareris couldn't tell if he was sobbing or laughing.

"We've done a terrible thing," Mirror murmured.

Bareris felt a pang of guilt. He clamped down on it, and it warped into irritation. "We do a lot of terrible things. It's time you got used to it."

Soul Steel

Lisa Smedman

forest of amtar

23 Uktar. the Year of the Private Tears (1204 DR)

Trelwyn's sword lay atop the slab of mottled stone that served as the mage's table, its point and hilt resting on skulls. Blue light flickered along the blade, sparks leaping like tiny fireflies from the edges of the weapon. A smell like burning hair filled the air.

Trelwyn watched the lichdrow work his enchantment. The ancient, undead mage bent over the sword, sprinkling ochre powder onto the steel blade. Before embracing undeath, Valek had been an elf, like Trelwyn—albeit drow. Where Trelwyn's skin was tree-trunk brown, Valek's was black as a cold, empty cavern. In the dim light of his chamber, it practically disappeared from sight; all she could see clearly was his high-collared white shirt. His hair, too, was the stark white of bone, whereas Trelwyn's was as short and curly as thistleberry vines, the rich brown color of growing things.

"How much longer?" Trelwyn asked in a tight whisper.

Valek glanced up at her. His face was gaunt, with a high forehead across which the black skin stretched parchment-thin. His eyes were sunken into hollow sockets, their irises the pale

pink color of watered-down blood. They narrowed. "Having second thoughts?" he asked in a voice that crackled like dead leaves. "Afraid to finish what we've started?"

"No." Trelwyn clenched her fists. "I will see my brother avenged."

Valek smiled, revealing too-long teeth set in receding gums. He reached for the stoppered glass vial that held her blood. "Hand me your scabbard."

Trelwyn unbuckled her belt and slid her scabbard from it. She handed it carefully to Valek, reluctant to touch the lichdrow's hand. The scabbard's leather cover was scuffed from years of use; it had been her father's, as had the sword. The straight-edged blade itself was equally worn looking, the leather wrapping of its hilt sweat-stained from use. A simple sword, but one that was about to bear a powerful enchantment. Once the spell was complete, the sword would be magically bound to the scabbard and capable of terrible deeds.

Valek uncorked the vial and tipped it over the sword, pouring a thin line of blood along the blade from hilt to point. As the blood struck the metal, it hissed like fat in a fire. The sparks leaping from the weapon took on a tinge of red, and gradually shaded to purple.

Trelwyn felt a heat just above her sword hand, and rubbed the spot on her wrist Valek had lanced to draw blood. The binding was beginning.

She glanced around the chamber, preferring to look anywhere but at the lichdrow. Candles behind red glass shades filled the room with blood-smear light. The stone walls had niches filled with dusty black boxes and skeletal figurines with leering faces. Trelwyn couldn't shed the feeling they were watching her. The only exit lay behind an enormous circular stone that had rolled into place at Valek's command. Behind it lay the maze of tunnels and caverns that led back to the surface.

A muffled whine drew Trelwyn's attention to the spot where her captive lay. The dwarf had awakened and was struggling against his bonds. He twisted his head back and forth, rubbing his bearded face against the carpet in an effort to dislodge the gag from his mouth. He tried to speak, but the wad of cloth dampened his voice. His eyes, however, were eloquent with fear. They kept darting to the drow.

"Be still!" Valek hissed. He flicked a finger in the dwarf's direction and spoke a guttural word. The captive screamed against his gag as a multitude of blisters erupted upon his skin.

"That wasn't necessary!" Trelwyn gritted. "His life may be forfeit, but there's no need to torture him."

The lichdrow snorted. "That's a fine sentiment, coming from someone who's about to take his life. As far as I'm concerned, the dwarf is just meat that happens to still be breathing."

"Our law demands his death—but it should be a quick, clean one."

"A sword thrust through the heart, perhaps?"

"Exactly. Leave him alone until then. No more sorcery."

"As you wish." The drow turned back to his work. His lip curled disdainfully. "You surface elves are soft—and overly sentimental. The pain I just inflicted will be nothing compared to the agony he'll feel when your sword steals his soul."

Trelwyn glanced at the dwarf. Already, the blisters were subsiding. "But the pain will be brief—won't it?"

Valek gave her a death's head grin. "Quite the opposite. Until the sword kills again, his soul will remain trapped within the blade, and in constant torment." One bony finger stroked the air. "It will feel like a long, slow slide down the edge of a knife. The agony will only end when the sword kills again and another soul is trapped. Then the first one will be destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Trelwyn gasped.

"Utterly."

"I thought you said the soul would be released." The lichdrow laughed, " 'Displaced' was the word I used. I never said it would survive."

Trelwyn's mouth went dry, "But..."

One of the lichdrow's frayed white eyebrows rose. He was enjoying watching her squirm. "Still want to continue?"

Trelwyn winced. She'd come to the lichdrow for a souldrinker—a weapon that could dtaw the soul from the body and hold it fast, making it impossible for healers to perform a resurrection. She'd assumed that once the soul was released, it would find its way to the gods and dwell in their domain.

She glanced at her captive. His face was pale, his eyes wide and pleading. Desperate grunts came from behind the gag.

Trelwyn tore her eyes away. Killing was one rhing. A body was just a vessel, after all. But destroying a soul...

The lichdrow stared at her. Waiting. His undead eyes bore into hers, mocking her, asking the silent question. Was she willing to descend to his level?

She dug fingernails into her palms, just as she had the day Rollan was executed. The memory of her brother's last moments filled her mind. His wide, innocent eyes. The grunt the striking arrow had forced from his lips. Rollan, in his usual simple way, had accepted the queen's ruling—accepted the stupid law that Trelwyn had railed against, screaming in protest until no one would listen. Yet as the life seeped from his body, he'd swung his glance to Trelwyn, as if to ask why.

Why hadn't she been there to prevent the chain of events from happening in the first place? Whenever he'd stumbled before, she'd been there to hold his hand and nurse his hurts. That's the way it had been, ever since his birth.

But now her brother's hand was cold and dead. Rollan was gone.

Trelwyn swallowed hard. She would do it. She had to. For Rollan. The blood laws demanded it.

Surely one dwarf soul wasn't so high a price to pay? "Continue," she told Valek.

The dwarfs grunts rose to a high, choked scream. Trelwyn steadfastly refused to look at him.

The lichdrow smiled and returned to his work. He held up the sheath and poured the remainder of Trelwyn's blood into it. Then he lifted the sword from the skulls and slid it into the sheath, quenching the sparks.

Trelwyn closed her eyes. What had she been thinking, to seek out Valek? Yet only with his help could Trelwyn hope to enforce justice upon her queen.

And justice it would be, even though only Trelwyn knew the truth of it.

Trelwyn's brother Rollan had been a royal attendant, like his father before him. But with his gentle temperament and simple thoughts, Rollan was not truly suited for the intrigue and wordplay of the royal court. Fortunately—or so Trelwyn thought at the time—her brother's coppery-red hair and chiseled features had caught the fancy of Queen Bethilde. She had promoted him to keeper of the royal owls. It was a job Rollan excelled at. Once, when an owl nudged one of her eggs out of the nest, Rollan had picked it carefully off the forest floor and carried it in a pouch under his shirt, against his warm skin, until it had hatched. He had even started to resemble an owl; he blinked slowly and watched others quietly with round eyes.

The green elves of the Forest of Amtar had few laws, but they were rigidly enforced. One stipulated that any who harmed the royal animals would suffer the same fate.

A tenday-and-two ago, Rollan had defended one of "his" owls against what he thought was a wild jaguar, felling the giant cat

with an arrow as it sprang at the owl's nest. He hadn't realized, at the time he loosed that fatal arrow, that his target was the queen's own hunting jaguar. Somehow, it had shed its identifying collar.

Following custom—and despite Trelwyn's impassioned pleas to the queen—the royal guard had executed Rollan. Afterward, they'd collapsed his shelter, giving it back to the forest.

Trelwyn went there the next day, to recover something of her brother's as a keepsake. In a hollow spot between two layers

of one of the twigweave walls, she'd discovered a rough journal, written in his simple blockish handwriting. His "memory book," he'd called it. Trelwyn had been loath to read it at first, thinking it an invasion of her brother's privacy. But then she succumbed to curiosity, and the longing to hear his voice once more, if only in her mind.

She had flipped idly through the pages of the journal, reading a sentence here and there. Then an entry near the middle of the book caught her eye. In it, Rollan described how, late one night as he had perched silently in the treetops with one of his owls, he had seen Queen Bethilde dallying with a lover—whose name the journal didn't provide. Alarmed by the queen's transgression and not wanting to see more, Rollan had climbed silently down from the tree to slip away, but unfortunately the owl perched above hooted loudly. Bethilde had startled and looked up at the owl—but Rollan was certain the queen had not seen him. He'd been on the ground and backing away into the shadows by then.

Trelwyn read the remainder of the journal carefully. Beside an entry about the birth of a new hatchling, Rollan had noted the birth of Bethilde's son, and the king's great pleasure that the gods had finally bestowed upon him a royal heir, after decades without one. Rollan had speculated that he was probably the only elf in the forest—save for Bethilde's secret lover—who knew the true father of the child. But out of loyalty to the queen, he wrote, he would remain silent.

That was the last entry in the journal. Two days later, Rollan had killed the queen's jaguar, and had been executed by one of her archers. Rollan had taken a single arrow through the throat, just as the jaguar had—his silence guaranteed.

Stunned, Trelwyn had set Rollan's journal aside. Then she'd leaped up and run to the spot where Rollan had shot the jaguar. She searched the undergrowth until she found what she was looking for—a wide leather collar, studded with gold and silver leaves.

Trelwyn lifted the collar from the ground. The buckle was undone. The odds of it falling open on its own. just a few paces from the tree where Rollan was watching over the latest brood of hatchlings, and just two days after the birth of the queen's bastard child. were slim indeed. The jaguar's "missing" collar had been no accident. Nor was its pounce on the owl's nest. Queen Bethilde's hunting jaguar had been trained to obey no orders but her own. The queen herself must have ordered the cat to attack the owl's nest, knowing what her royal owl keeper would do.

The discovery filled Trelwyn with rage. She would accuse the queen. Hurl the collar at her. together with her accusations, and read the guilt in her face. Demand the queen's death, according to the laws that stipulated blood for blood.

After a moment's thought, however, she laughed bitterly at her folly. She had the jaguar collar, but on its own, without knowing the name of the queen's lover, it proved nothing. If she could have shown Rollan's journal to the king, he might have believed her story—but that was no longer possible. The king had died, leading a raid on Elvcswatch. He'd delayed the raid until after the birth of his child, and had paid dearly for it. By the time the raiders reached Elvcswatch, the city was ready for them. Somehow, word of the impending raid had slipped out.

Trelwyn could guess how that had happened. With the birth of a royal heir ensuring her continued rulership as regent, and

a new lover to delight her, Queen Bethilde had no need of her former husband.

No, Trelwyn thought, there was only one course of action left to her—to exact vengeance with her own hands.

Queen Bethilde's enchantments protected her from ordinary weapons. Only something bearing a powerful counterspell would break through them. And only a weapon with the power to drink a soul would prevent the queen's healers from immediately resurrecting her. And so Trelwyn had sought out magic the queen would never suspect one of her subjects might use.

The magic of the Undcrdark.

The dark magic of the lichdrow.

"The sword is ready." Valek's voice snapped Trelwyn out of her bitter memories. The lichdrow held the sheathed sword out to her, hilt first.

"Take it!" he hissed. "Draw it. Bind it to your hand."

Trelwyn swallowed down her hesitation and took the sheathed weapon from him. As she drew her sword, a tingle rushed into her fingers and palm. The weapon shone red in the candlelight, the hilt pulsing slightly in time with the beating of her heart. She could almost taste the blade's empty hunger.

Valek lifted the captive to his feet and held him tight in his bony hands. The dwarf stood sullenly, head hanging low, as if he'd at last accepted the inevitable. Trelwyn turned to face him, and drew her sword back for a thrust to the heart. She had killed before, but never in so deliberate a fashion—and never with so final an outcome. She knew now why they

called it “cold blood.” Her skin felt as though it were rimed with ice.

Trelwyn reminded herself that the dwarf was a trespasser and a thief. Despite the ancient pact, he’d entered their forest, fouled the river with his digging, and wounded two of the patrol that

had been sent to drive him off. Had the dwarf’s axe blows landed differently, murder would also be among his crimes.

“Do it,” Valek said, his eyes glittering in anticipation of what was to come. “Bloody the sword. Kill him.”

Trelwyn took a deep breath. Then she thrust. But in that same instant the dwarf twisted out of the lichdrow’s hands—and by so doing, forced the lichdrow to step into her thrust. Instead of skewering her captive, her blade plunged into Valek’s chest, piercing his undead heart. The lichdrow’s eyes widened, and he clutched at the blade with both hands. A shrill, dust-scented scream burst from his thin lips.

Trelwyn watched, transfixed with horror, as a red mist seeped out of Valek’s wound and coiled around her sword. The blade drank it in. Then, suddenly, the light went out of Valek’s eyes. He sagged to one side, then fell, his body pulling free of the sword.

Trelwyn stood, stunned at what had just transpired, the sword in her hand dripping foul-smelling black blood. “LcaHord preserve me,” she whispered. “I’ve killed him.” She backed away from the lichdrow’s body, fearful he might lash out at her even in death. But his corpse lay utterly still. His soul had not fled to its phylactery. Instead, it was trapped within her sword.

If it found a way to escape, gods only knew what might happen.

But if she could destroy his soul quickly enough ...

Out of the corner of her eye, Trelwyn spotted the dwarf wriggling across the carpet in a desperate attempt to reach the door—even though he'd never be able to open it, bound as he was. Trelwyn strode over to him. The dwarf, meanwhile, at last scraped the gag from his mouth.

"I beg you, not with that sword!" he cried. "If you must kill me. use something else."

"I've no choice," Trelwyn said—as much to herself as to him. The sword quivered in her hand, as if the lichdrow were struggling to break free.

"There's always a choice," her captive gasped. "Lei me go. I'll keep silent about ... all of this. Just let me live."

Trelwyn raised her sword. "I'm sorry you have to die this way," she told him. "But you brought this upon yourself. You knew our laws, yet you entered our forest anyway. By doing so, you provoked the attack—and all that followed from it."

"How convenient!" he spat. His nostrils flared. "Did you volunteer to kill me because you believe in upholding the law—or because you needed a victim to enchant the sword? Would you have sacrificed one of your own people if I hadn't come along?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Trelwyn snapped. "I wouldn't..."

"Then who would you have killed? The spell requires the death of an intelligent being, doesn't it?"

Trelwyn said nothing. But when she looked deep inside herself, she realized the truth. If not for the dwarf, whom might she have chosen for Valek to work his evil magic upon? How far would her thirst for vengeance have driven her?

“Are you truly upholding the laws of the Trunadar,” the dwarf asked softly, “or simply serving your own ends?”

Trelwyn closed her eyes. Was she any better than Queen Bethilde?

Yes, she told herself. Unlike the sentence the queen had imposed on Rollan, the dwarf’s sentence was just. He’d known the penalty for entering their forest—and still he’d chosen to trespass. It was only his method of execution that was at issue.

“You attacked our people,” she said flatly.

“Attacked?” the dwarf spat back, “it was you Trunadar who attacked, without provocation—I was only defending myself.”

“You trespassed. Stole from us.”

“I took nothing. I was merely prospecting. I would have drawn up a formal pact with your king and queen, before lifting a single nugget from the river.”

Trelwyn shook her head. “You expect us to believe that?”

“If you don’t, you’re fools. Know this, elf: Your people’s secret will eventually get out. The river bears a fortune in gold. There’ll be other prospectors along, sooner or later. And the miners who follow will cut down your precious forest for fuel and timber for their mining camps—and make war upon the Trunadar, when they resist. Your people will soon regret

having killed the one person who would have ensured that your gold would be mined in a fashion that left the land itself unblemished.”

So that was why he’d been so insistent upon an audience with the queen. Instead of hearing him out, however, Queen Bethilde had given her flat refusal: “We want no dwarves in our forest. And no mining□of any kind.” she’d said. Then she’d ordered the dwarfs execution.

And Trelwyn had volunteered to carry it out.

Trelwyn squatted and wiped the sword on the carpet, cleaning the lich’s blood from it. She needed time to think. Killing Queen Bethilde would purge Valek’s soul from the sword, but did she dare wait that long?

“How do you know our language?” she asked the dwarf.

His lips curled in a sad smile. “Not all green elves are as hostile as you Trunadar,” he answered. “Some value the friendship of other races and trust them with their secrets. I lived, for a time, among the elves of the Chondalwood.”

He had to be lying. “What’s the host name of the elf who rules them?”

He answered□correctly. Hope glimmered in his eyes as he saw Trelwyn’s eyebrows rise.

“I’ll keep your secret,” he said, speaking rapidly. “I won’t speak to anyone about ... your plans. I could even help you escape, after the deed is done.”

“Escape?” Trelwyn laughed bitterly. She stood over him again. “That wasn’t in my plans.”

His eyes widened slightly. “But—”

If she didn’t kill him now, she never would. Before the dwarf could finish, Trelwyn raised her sword and brought it whistling down. Shocked by her sudden slash, he had no chance to avoid the sword’s path. But instead of cleanly severing his neck, the blade veered at the last moment and thudded into the floor beside his head, sending harsh vibrations up Trelwyn’s sword arm.

Trelwyn recovered, and thrust at his chest instead. Her blade leaped aside like a live thing, its point tearing a gouge in the carpet.

The dwarf gave a bark of surprised laughter. “Looks like your sword has a mind of its own.”

Trelwyn yanked her sword up to eye level. “Valek!”

The sword dipped slightly in her hands, as if in answer.

“Relinquish your control of the weapon. You’re only prolonging your torment.”

The sword veered sharply left, then right: Valek, shaking his head.

“Then enjoy your agony, lichdrow!” Trelwyn shouted, shoving the sword into her scabbard. That, Valek allowed her to do. As the blade slithered home, she thought she heard evil laughter in the scrape of metal upon metal.

As she stood, wondering what to do next, a tap sounded against the door. A muffled voice came from behind it. “Master? Arc you there?”

Trelwyn looked down at her captive and motioned him to keep silent.

The dwarf nodded. Avoiding a confrontation with the drow, at least, was something they could agree on.

Trelwyn pressed an ear to the door and listened until she heard footsteps departing. Then she leaned against the door, rolling it open a crack. When she was certain no one was lurking in the corridor, she untied the dwarf's ankles and hauled him to his feet.

She'd worry about what to do with him once they reached the surface.

Trelwyn emerged from the tangle of brambles that hid the tunnel entrance, and yanked the dwarf out after her. It was almost dawn—already the sky to the east was pink. While that was a blessing, because the lichdrow's servants would be loath to emerge from their underground lair into full sunlight, it also presented Trelwyn with a problem. Natural light destroyed drow magic. The enchantments the lichdrow had cast on her sword would fade as soon as the rays of the sun touched the weapon. The scabbard would protect the blade itself, but she had to keep the hilt covered. And that meant not drawing her sword until darkness fell. If she wanted to control her prisoner, she would have to do it with her bare hands.

The dwarf glanced at her sword, then away. A sly smile crept across his face. He obviously knew the limitations of drow magic.

“So you’ve decided not to kill me?”

Trelwyn pulled a piece of dark cloth from her pocket and wrapped it around the hilt of her weapon. “No need.” She

noded at her weapon. "If the lichdrow could have escaped the sword, he'd have done so by now."

She hoped that was true.

He nodded. "And my death sentence?"

"Let someone else carry it out." On the trudge back to the surface, she'd decided to simply keep him close by until nightfall. Then she'd abandon him. and move swiftly to the royal residence. In the unlikely event a patrol listened to the dwarf long enough for him to spill what she had planned, it would be too late. More likely, any patrol would kill him on sight.

"Your name's Trelwyn, right?"

She nodded.

"Mine's Spinnel. Son of Feldsson." A smile flickered across his face. "I'll spare you the rest of my lineage. Instead I'd rather hear why you're so set on killing your queen."

Trelwyn rounded angrily on him. What business did a dwarf have, asking her that? Her fingers brushed the cloth-covered hilt, reminding her not to draw her sword. How far she'd sunk, in turning to the lichdrow and his foul magic! She needed to justify her actions to someone. Even if that someone was a greedy, hairy-faced dwarf.

"Sit down," she said, pointing to a log.

He turned his bound hands toward her. "Would you?"

She untied him. Where could he run to, after all?

He sat and listened to her tale, stroking his beard. When she finished, he nodded. "I understand now," he said slowly. "Truly. We have a similar philosophy: 'a beard for a beard.' Sometimes you have to take the law into your own hands."

They sat for a time, listening to the early-morning chirping of the birds. The forest was a mixture of dappled greens and soft browns. A gentle breeze carried the tang of tree sap and the loamy smell of earth. The quiet joy of the woods brought home to Trelwyn just how much she stood to lose. But the memory of her brother's arrow-pierced throat pushed these considerations aside.

Spinnel at last broke the silence. "I'm going to help you."

Now it was Trelwyn's turn to laugh. "Why? Did my story move you that much? I didn't see any tears."

"I'm going to help you," Spinnel repeated, "because I'll need your help in return to escape this forest." He paused to let that sink in. "I'm guessing that you'll need to get the queen alone, to ensure no one stops you from killing her—but that her guards will be right outside her door. To ensure that the queen isn't resurrected, you'll need to find a way to 'release' her soul from the sword. You could do that by killing one of your own people, but I'm guessing that wasn't your plan. Which leaves

only one possible victim—you." He raised an eyebrow. "Am I right, so far?"

Trelwyn grudgingly nodded.

"All well and good, if by killing yourself your soul would have joined your brother's in Correllon's domain. But much less attractive now, I'm guessing." He forced her to meet his eye.

“Does your thirst for vengeance run deep enough to warrant the destruction of your very soul?”

She shivered at the thought.

“I didn’t think so,” he said. “But there is another option. Like I said, I have magic that can help you escape. Once you do, you can expose the sword to sunlight and destroy the enchantment□ and the queen’s soul with it. Without having to kill anyone.”

Trelwyn wondered if she should believe him. “What magic?”

“A cloak that can render you invisible.”

“If you have that, why didn’t you use it to avoid the patrol?”

“I would have, if they hadn’t crept up on me. You Trunadar are a stealthy lot.” He grinned. “So do we have a deal? If I tell you where my cloak is, will you use it and then bring it back to me here, so I can escape this wretched forest?”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

White teeth gleamed in his bushy beard as Spinnel smiled. “You can’t. Any more than I can trust you. But we’re each the only hope the other one has got.”

Trelwyn nodded. Now that he’d offered this slim thread of hope, she wanted to seize it with both hands. But one problem remained. “What if Valek won’t let me kill the queen?”

“That’s a problem, isn’t it?” He stared up at the rustling leaves. “Tell me more about the ‘binding’ the drow cast upon it. Maybe I’ll think of something.”

Trelwyn summed up the little Valek had told her. The lichdrow's enchantment would enable her to leave her sword with the royal guard, and enter the royal audience chamber unarmed.

As soon as she reached for her scabbard, the sword would magically appear inside it, no matter how far away it was or who was holding it. She could throw her sword into the depths of the ocean—and still it would appear in her scabbard, ready for use, when it was needed.

“So only you can draw the sword?” Spinnel mused. “But once you’ve done this, someone else could wield it, right?”

“No elf would kill their queen! Even if I told them about my brothet, they’d never—”

“I was referring to myself.”

“You?” Trelwyn shook her head, amazed at his audacity. “You’d never get close enough to Queen Bethilde! In case you’ve forgotten, there’s a death sentence upon you. The first Trunadar who spots you will carry it out.”

“We’ll think of a way around that.”

She snorted. Dwarves could be such simple creatures, at times.

“Dwarves are immune to a number of forms of magic,” Spinnel continued. “Whatever enchantment Valek is using to control the sword might not be strong enough to overpower me. Let me kill Queen Bethilde. I’ve got as much of a right to claim her life as you. She’s the one who sentenced me to death, after all.”

Trelwyn paused, thinking. She certainly wasn't capable of wielding the sword herself, with Valek fighting her.

"It just might work," she admitted. "But getting you close to the queen will be difficult. There is, however, one possibility..."

Spinnel's eyes glinted as he listened to her plan.

The royal court was nestled in the treerops, in chambers that had been skillfully fashioned from living tree branches and trunks. The Trunadar had begun the project centuries ago, carefully pruning and shaping trees until they formed a vast arboreal complex. The commoners of the Trunadar moved from place

to place, making temporary camps in whatever clearings and groves took their fancy, setting up camp inside hollow stumps, or building elaborate "perches" in the treetops. But the royal residence had endured the centuries, its magic keeping it leafy and secure, even in the coldest winters. In all that time, only green elves had ever set eyes upon it. And now Trelwyn was taking Spinnel—a dwarf—straight to it.

She dragged his limp body behind her through the forest. His hands were bound behind him at the wrists but his feet were loose, and left furrows in the forest floor. He was pretending—and doing a good job of it, too—to be unconscious. Night had fallen, but the moon shone down through the branches. Ahead lay the cluster of trees that formed the base of the royal residence. A half-dozen elves—members of the royal guard—stood watch between the trunks. Dressed in earth browns and leaf greens, they were almost indistinguishable in the darkness. Others prowled the shadows silently, like watchful jaguars.

In an eye-blink, a half dozen of them were in front of Trelwyn, forming a barrier between her and the royal residence, arrows nocked and bows drawn. Trelwyn's luck was holding: the officer in charge this night was an old friend.

"Delith!" she called out. "Don't shoot!"

Delith stepped forward and kicked Spinnel. On cue, Spinnel groaned.

"Alive?" Delith said, incredulous. He stared at Trelwyn. "You were supposed to execute him. What are you doing!" Behind Delith, the other guards shifted slightly, getting into position to loose their arrows more effectively.

"You guards didn't do a very good job of searching the dwarf," she told Delith. Slowly, she reached into her trouser pocket. She pulled out the royal jaguar's collar and held it up for all to see. "I found this stuffed into his boot."

Delith's eyes widened. He recognized it, of course.

"The dwarf claimed to have found it in the forest," Trelwyn told him, "but under more strenuous questioning" she nodded down at the bruises on Spinnel's face "he admitted to having removed it from the neck of the queen's hunting jaguar himself."

"Impossible!" one of the guards spat. "If he so much as got close to the queen's jaguar, it would have torn him apart."

Trelwyn held Delith's eye. "The dwarf claims to know the commands that quiet the beast."

"He's lying," Delith said flatly. "The dwarf wove you a story to keep himself alive longer."

“What if he isn’t lying?” Trelwyn held the collar higher. “Doesn’t it seem a bit coincidental that he had the collar hidden in his boot? Think about it! Not only does he speak our language fluently—he allowed our patrol to capture him, instead of fighting to the death, despite knowing our laws would demand his execution. And why? Because he wanted to get close to Queen Bethilde, to use her own jaguar against her.” She lowered the collar. “Unfortunately for his plans, Rollan had already killed the beast.”

She took a deep breath, using the excuse of the memory of her brother’s death to steel herself. “One of our own people,” she said slowly, “must have told the dwarf the commands the queen used with her jaguar,” she continued. “And not just anyone, but someone close to the queen. Someone close enough to have overheard the commands she uses. And that means there’s a traitor in our midst, within the court. Our queen will want to know that person’s name—and to judge for herself if the dwarf is telling the truth.”

Delith’s expression hardened. He caught the eye of one of the other guards. “Inform the queen, and see if it is her pleasure to give an audience.”

He moved as if to seize the dwarf. Trelwyn blocked him. “No, Delith. I’ll take him. I too would like to hear what the dwarf

has to say when the queen questions him.” She shook Spinnel; he groaned again, as if in agony from a recent thrashing. “Had this villain’s story come out sooner, my brother might have been rewarded—instead of executed.”

Guards ahead and behind them, Trelwyn and her “captive”—on his feet now, but pretending to be weak and stumbling—climbed the staircase that spiraled around a tree whose upper branches held the royal audience chamber. They at

last reached a platform high above the ground where the branches of many trees had been woven together to form a floor. Moonlight shimmered through the leaves overhead, casting dappled shadows.

Delith turned to Trelwyn. "Surrender your weapons," he said formally, "and prepare to meet your queen."

She drew her sword and handed it to him. Delith passed it to one of the guards who would be remaining outside. Trelwyn took off her backpack and pulled a sheathed dagger from it, surrendering it too. The guard who took it didn't so much as glance at the cloak the pack also held. Nor did he ask her to empty her pack.

Good. They trusted her. As Trelwyn put the pack on again, guards searched the apparently only semiconscious Spinnel thoroughly, this time. Then Delith gave the sign that Trelwyn could proceed.

Accompanied by Delith and two other guards, Trelwyn dragged Spinnel through a leafy tunnel to the queen's audience chamber. Set in the hollow of an immense tree, the chamber had a flat floor, carpeted with fragrant wild-rose petals, and a rounded ceiling, high overhead. Insects had been encouraged to bore the branches, producing a lacy pattern of holes that let in the moonlight. Dancing fireflies filled the room with streaks of blue and white light, while low fires, contained in wide stone

bowls, warmed the room with a soft yellow glow. The smell of cedar sap lingered in the air.

Queen Bethilde sat cross-legged on a throne padded with a cushion stuffed with moss. Her slender fingers toyed with one of the tiny white flowers that had been woven into the arms of the throne. Her long, red-blond hair hung in a

single braid over one shoulder. Her soft leather shirt, embroidered with gold thread, showed the symbols of her rule: a jaguar and owl rampant. Despite having given birth only a tenday-and-two ago, Bethilde showed no signs of weariness. Her healers had taken away any lingering pain or farigue.

Delith ushered Trelwyn to the center of the room, halting her a half-dozen paces from the queen. The other two guards flanked her, arrows pointed at Spinnel, lest he make any sudden moves. Trelwyn released the back of the dwarfs shirt, letting him fall to the floor. Spinnel groaned again—hopefully he wasn't overdoing it—and then sagged into stillness.

The queen looked up at Trelwyn. an apparently serene look on her face. She barely glanced at the collar in Trelwyn's hand. An understanding passed between them, however: The queen had realized that Trelwyn now knew the truth behind her brother's death. But Queen Bethilde would play this through.

"Trelwyn Vtthannis. What brings you to my audience chamber with ... this?" Bethilde flicked a hand at the dwarf. "When last we spoke, you seemed eager to execute him.

Trelwyn bowed. "That was indeed the only thing on my mind, m'lady." She rose. "Until I found this." She tossed the jaguar's collar on the floor between herself and the queen.

"There's a traitor in our midst, m'lady," Trelwyn said. "One I'm sure you—and the king—will want to know the name of."

Queen Bethilde plucked one of the blossoms from her throne and rubbed it between her fingers. She pretended to sniff the fragrance of the crushed blossom—a clever way to hide the angry

flattening of her lips. Then she turned to Delith. "The secrets of court are not for every ear." She gestured toward the exit. "You and your two guards may stand down."

Delith's eyes widened. His eye flicked to the prone Spinnel. "But"

"Leave us." Her voice was soft—but unrelenting as steel.

Delith bowed and hurriedly waved the other guards from the audience chamber. As soon as they were gone, the queen glared openly at Trelwyn. "Playing court games, are we?" she said, eyes blazing as she rose from her throne. She strode closer to Trelwyn, completely ignoring Spinnel, still feigning unconsciousness. "I suppose you're going to demand payment now, in return for your silence."

Trelwyn feigned nervousness. If that had been the only game she'd been playing at, she'd have lost. Whatever price she demanded of the queen would have been paid, and Trelwyn's silence ensured shortly afterward with her death. But now the moment had come. She and Spinnel were alone with the queen. Trelwyn cleared her throat, pretending to be working up the courage to speak—their previously arranged signal.

The instant she saw Spinnel's arms flex—a quick tug that freed his wrists from the false knot—Trelwyn reached for her "empty" scabbard and drew her sword. She flung it hilt-first to Spinnel even as the dwarf leaped to his feet.

Queen Bethilde whirled, even as the sword flashed past her.

Spinnel reached for the thrown sword, but before he could grab it. Queen Bethilde flicked a hand and shouted an invocation. The sword flipped over in mid-flight, so fast it was a whistling blur, and plunged point-first into Spinnel's

chest. A shocked expression on his face, Spinnel looked dumbly down at the sword. "How did she ..." Then his short legs buckled under him, and he fell in a heap to the floor. Red mist rose from his wound to spiral around the blade.

The queen's laughter filled the chamber. "Oh very good. Trelwyn. A wonderful act. But however amusing it might be, your little performance is at an end." Her hands rose.

"No!" Trelwyn leaped for Spinnel's body. A trail of red mist seeped from the blade and drifted across the room as she yanked the blade from his chest. "For Rollan!" she shouted, lunging at the queen.

Bethilde was quicker. Light exploded in Trelwyn's eyes, and her ears filled with a loud clangor. Blinded and deafened, she slashed wildly with the sword, but couldn't connect. Then the sword swerved left of its own accord and struck! Trelwyn felt warm blood splatter her hand and wrist. Then the sound of shouting voices joined the ringing in her ears and someone knocked her down from behind. Her sword was wrenched from her grip and her backpack torn off. Rough hands forced her arms behind her back, and someone bound her arms. Then she was dragged from the room.

After some time, the clangor faded and the dazzling light went away. Trelwyn still saw spots of white before her eyes, but by looking sideways she could make out her surroundings.

She was bound hand and foot, inside a cell whose bars were the roots of a tree. There was no door; magic had been used to widen a space in the tangle of roots and then close it again.

She rolled over. Immediately, there was movement outside the cell. Six guards, armed with bows, kept a careful watch.

She glanced down at her hip. The scabbard was gone.

Trelwyn squirmed herself into a sitting position. She noticed Delith staring in at her.

“Why did you do it?” he asked. On his face was a look of utter disgust. “What did the dwarf offer you? Gold? “

“Is the queen dead?”

“No, Lcaflord be praised. Her healers saw to her wound.” Trelwyn despaired. She felt as though a hole had opened and her stomach had fallen into it. She’d failed.

“But you soon will be.” Delith continued in a harsh voice. He raised his bow. “Were it not for her command, I’d have executed you myself.”

Trelwyn wasn’t listening. She had failed. She supposed it was the Leaflord’s punishment, for consorting with a lichdrow.

“You there!” a familiar voice called out from somewhere behind Delith. “Guard!”

Delith whirled and bowed. “M’lady.”

Trelwyn glanced up at the woman she’d just tried to kill. Queen Bethilde walked slowly to the cell. She was bundled in a heavy cloak, but Trelwyn could see the bloodstains on her robe. The queen hadn’t bothered to change. Instead she’d come to exact her revenge personally, before Trelwyn could poison her guards’ ears with the truth.

“Release your prisoner,” the queen ordered.

Delith jerked in surprise. “Release her? But m’lady—”

“The elf has done me a great service. She saved my life.”

“But she attacked you!” Delith protested. “I saw her strike the blow myself.”

“I too!” another guard added.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Bethilde replied. “That was no dwarf, but a powerful lichdrow who had altered his body, giving him the appearance of one of the stout folk. Did you not see his spirit—that red mist—seeking out its phylactery after he died? Trelwyn was charmed by his spell, and tricked into aiding him. But she remains my loyal servant. Had she not found the strength to resist the lichdrow’s magic and kill him, her sword thrust against me would have struck true. Trelwyn is my champion.”

“I don’t understand, m’lady.” Delith’s brow furrowed as he furiously rethought recent events. “If she’d already killed the lichdrow, then why—?”

The queen’s voice crackled with authority. “If you’d been thinking, guard, you never would have ushered an cnsorccld Trelwyn and a disguised lichdrow into my presence! Odd behavior indeed! I’ve half a mind to put you in the cell on suspicion of being the traitor.”

Delith blanched.

“Now untie your prisoner, and bring her to my audience chamber at once!”

Delith practically fell over, so deeply did he bow.

A druid was summoned to open a gap in the cell. Delith himself stepped inside, untied Trelwyn and helped her rise to

her feet. "My apologies," he murmured.

Trelwyn didn't bother to acknowledge him. She knew what was coming—she'd die the moment the guards were dismissed and she was alone with Bethilde. Although how the queen would explain the death of her newly named "champion" was beyond Trelwyn.

As Delith led her from the cell, Trelwyn considered bolting into the woods. But where would she go? The queen had only to issue a command, and every green elfin the Forest of Amtar would go without reverie until they'd hunted her down.

The walk to the royal residence and up the spiral steps was the longest Trelwyn had ever taken. At the same time, it was over in an eye-blink. As they entered the audience chamber, she fought down the trembling in her limbs and tried to find the courage to die bravely.

The queen was quick to dismiss her guards, as Trelwyn had feared. Somehow, Trelwyn found the strength to meet the queen's eyes.

With a start, she realized those eyes held a barely contained fear. Indeed, the queen's whole posture radiated alarm. The end of her braid had come undone, and she looked somehow uncomfortable in her clothes. Bethilde walked clumsily—and not because of the wound the sword had given her, which her healers had already tended to. Bethilde's hand reached for a spot below her chin in a nervous gesture then clenched suddenly.

The queen walked with overcautious steps to the door and peered through it. Then her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Trelwyn, it’s me. Spinnel.”

Trelwyn drew back suspiciously. “Enough, m’lady. Don’t play with me, like one of your jaguars with its prey. Kill me quickly and be done with it.”

“A quick death.” The queen smiled. “That’s just what you promised me in the lichdrow’s chambers.” She reached again for her chin, hesitated, and lowered her hand again. “Blast me if it doesn’t feel strange, not having a beard. I feel naked!”

“Spinnel?” Trelwyn looked at the queen in shock, at last starting to believe her ears, despite the contradiction her eyes presented. “But how? What?”

The queen—no, Spinnel in Bethilde’s body—leaned forward and grabbed Trelwyn’s shoulder to steady herself. “Odd,” he whispered, “being so tall. I don’t know which is stranger—being a woman, or a green elf.”

He shook his head. “In answer to your question, I’m not sure myself what happened. When I... died”—the queen’s face grimaced as Spinnel said the word—“and entered the sword, I could sense what was happening around me, but I couldn’t see, hear, or feel the way I normally do. Instead everything was all flat surfaces, sharp angles...” He shuddered. “And then the pain began. I can’t even describe it to you. Imagine the most agonizing wound you’ve ever suffered, and magnify it a hundredfold. I had to get out—even if that meant destroying my soul.” “I’m ... sorry. Truly.”

“Not your fault.”

Trelwyn stared at the body that had once housed her queen, trying to think of it as a shell around Spinnel. She still couldn’t help clinging under his touch.

“So that was you who guided my sword stroke.”

“Yes.”

Trelwyn glanced at the bandage on the queen’s thigh. Understanding dawned. “The sword doesn’t need to kill to draw in a soul—it just needs to wound.”

“Exactly,” Spinnel agreed. “The lichdrow lied to you. The sword doesn’t steal souls, nor does it destroy them—if it did, Valek would have been more careful, back in his chamber. If a fatal blow is struck, the soul already inside the sword has no living vessel to inhabit, and departs to whatever realm it normally would after death. But when it’s a nonfatal wound, it jumps into the wounded person—and remains there.”

Trelwyn frowned. “Then why didn’t Valek allow the sword to wound you? Surely he wanted out!”

“You were trying to kill me—not wound me. That would have only put Valek back inside his phylactery.”

Suddenly, Trelwyn understood. “Valek wanted to switch places with our queen!” She shuddered. “No wonder he agreed to help me! And no wonder I skewered him, back in his chamber. He stepped into my sword thrust!”

Trelwyn’s thoughts whirled as she realized the magnitude of the change she had just wrought. For the moment, the Trunadar thought Spinnel was their queen. That wouldn’t last long—he’d be found out, soon enough. And for now, the queen’s soul was trapped in the sword—wherever it was. But if Spinnel was correct about the way the sword worked, the queen could be back among them if the sword so much as nicked someone. Of course, if the sword struck a fatal blow instead, Bethilde would have to face the Leaflord’s judgment.

“Where’s your magical cloak?” Trelwyn asked Spinnel.
“Gone. The queen’s guards confiscated it, assuming it to be yours.”

Trelwyn nodded, expecting as much. She wasn’t going to sneak out of here, whatever she decided to do next. So be it.
“And my sword and scabbard?”

“Those. I ordered the guards to leave with me—for eventual analysis by my healers. For the moment, they’re safely hidden. As soon as it’s daylight, I’m destroying the sword.”

“Then you’ll be trapped in Queen Bethilde’s body forever! Or, more likely, until they realize who you are—and kill you.” She paused. “But there is, of course, an alternative.”

Spinnel’s eyes hardened. “I’m not going back into that sword.”

“Of course not! We’re destroying it, instead.”

Spinnel gave her a skeptical look. “Just like that?”

“Not quite—and not quite in that order. First, ‘Queen Bethilde’ will announce that she needs to visit the greensward to replenish her magic—and that only her most trusted adviser Trelwyn can accompany her. If we set out right away, we should reach the edge of the forest by dawn. As soon as the sun rises, we expose the sword and destroy it—and then you keep walking. Find a wizard who can polymorph you back into a dwarf, and all will be well again.”

Spinnel eyed her suspiciously. “What guarantee do I have that you won’t try to grab the sword and skewer me with it instead, as soon as we’re out of sight of your people?”

“I won’t. You have my word. I’ve kept it so far, haven’t I?”

Spinnel's eyes glinted. "I'd hoped you'd say that. I'm going to need your help, if I'm to convince your people I'm a green elf—let alone Queen Bethilde. But that means—for the moment, anyway—that you're going to obey your queen. Unless you'd rather I call my guards and have them execute you?"

For one horrible moment, Trelwyn thought he was serious. Then Spinnel laughed.

Trelwyn adopted a formal tone. "No need to call for them, m'lady," she answered, proffering a mock bow. "But there is one boon I would ask."

Spinnel waved one hand graciously. "Name it, elf."

"Before we leave, rescind the law that demands such harsh punishment of those who harm your royal beasts."

Spinnel grinned. "Consider it done."

Trelwyn and Spinnel halted at the edge of the forest. Ahead lay a creek, and beyond it a rolling grassland.

"We're here," she told Spinnel. "At the border. I've fulfilled my part of the bargain."

Spinnel, still in the queen's body, nodded. He handed her the sword. The rising sun drew mist from the dew-speckled grass, but failed to warm Trelwyn. The night's chill had settled deep in her bones.

She unwrapped the hilt, tossed the cloth aside, and drew the sword. It vibrated in her hand, but she gripped the hilt hard. Wary that Bethilde might find a way to animate the weapon. Trelwyn kneeled, placed the blade flat on the ground in full sunlight, and held it there.

The end was swifter than she'd expected. The steel blade dulled and suddenly tarnished. Then it began to crumble. The tip broke off first, and then the edges, as if invisible creatures were nibbling them away. Soon all that was left was the hilt in its sagging wrapping of leather, and the tang. A faint scream of rage sounded as the hilt crumbled like brittle chalk in Trelwyn's hand. Then all that was left was grit.

Trelwyn stood and wiped it from her hand.

Her brother had been avenged. The blood debt had been paid.

Then why did her hand still feel dirty?

"You did what you thought you had to," Spinnel told

her. "Sometimes the greatest love can lead us to our greatest mistakes."

Trelwyn said nothing. A tear slid down her face. She'd promised herself she wouldn't cry. She shook her head angrily and shifted her hand to the dagger at her hip. Then she felt Spinnel's hand on hers.

"You'll join Rollan," he said in the queen's voice. "But not just yet. There's another injustice you could right, if you've a mind to."

Trelwyn turned to him.

"Queen Bethilde couldn't have arranged the jaguar's attack alone," Spinnel told her. "Not so soon after having given birth, with her healers hovering around her. There's one more person who deserves your vengeance."

“Bethilde’s lover.”

Spinnel nodded. “You’re going to have to think of a very good story to explain how you ‘lost’ your queen.”

“I’ll think of something.” Trelwyn glanced at the spot where the sword had lain. She’d do it. For Rollan. The blood laws demanded it.

“I could help you when I get back. After I’ve been polymorphed.”

“You’d return?” Trelwyn asked in amazement. “Are you insane? The patrols will shoot the next dwarf who ventures into the Amtar on sight, after all that’s happened.”

“I think I can stand to be a green elf a little longer.” He glanced down at his body. “Just... not Queen Bethilde. An elf of the Chondalwood, perhaps. That’s a much easier transformation for any wizard to perform, anyway.”

Trelwyn’s eyebrows rose. “You’d go so far as that? Just to help me?”

Spinnel snorted. “Don’t Hatter yourself. There’s gold involved, remember?” He thumped his chest. “Inside, I’m still a dwarf.”

Trelwyn shook her head. “I’ll be watching for you, Spinnel. But ... how will I know you?”

“I’ll be the one wearing an empty scabbard.” Spinnel held out a hand. “You don’t need that anymore, right?”

She handed it to him. “No more drow magic.”

Spinnel saluted her with the scabbard. "Farewell then. I'll see you soon."

"That's where you're wrong."

Spinnel's eyebrows rose.

"I'm coming with you. Clever as you are, you're not going to fool anyone into thinking you're a green elf. Not without a lot of coaching."

Spinnel smiled. "I'd hoped you'd say that."

They walked away from the forest together, Trelwyn treading light on her feet, Spinnel walking awkwardly beside her in his assumed body.

Behind them, sunlight scoured the last of the night from the forest, and an owl hooted, as if in farewell.

The Resurrection Agent

Erin M. Evans

amn

2 EUasias, the Year of the Reborn Hero (1463 DR)

Vridihad asked the Harloi once what it was like to die.

The spy had hesitated. "You've never asked me that before."

"It didn't matter before," the spymaster replied. Her cough had grown worse and her dark skin had an ashen cast, but her eyes were still bright and sharp. "But now I'm rather invested in your answer. So avail me agent: what have you learned?"

"I don't recommend trying it," she said lightly.

"Harlot," Viridi said.

The Harlot looked out the window. The city of Athkala, illuminated and shadowed by torchlight, stretched up the hill to the glittering temple of Waukccn—much of that glitter, the Harlot knew, had come by Viridi's regular donations. If any god's favor could be bought, the Merchant's Friend seemed the likeliest.

The Harlot thought of the fear that washed over her nerves like a hot bath just before her vision went gray. She thought of the feeling of her soul leaving her body. She thought of the darkness that might last a heartbeat or an eternity depending on the whims of the Shadowfell. She thought of the confusion,

the unease that seized her on the Fugue Plane, and the pale gray mists that lapped everything there.

The first time the Harlot died, she fought it tooth and nail. She hadn't meant to—the Tcthyrian government had paid for her to gather information and to die in the process—but she hadn't yet learned to control her fear and it claimed her, making her into an animal. Forget Viridi's offer, forget the Shepherd's assurances that everything would be fine, she didn't want to die. She twisted and kicked and scratched her killer's face, trying to break free. But by then, she'd given up any advantage she would have had and her chance to escape was gone.

The man strangling her didn't care that she had changed her mind. His fingers sank into her neck, deeper and deeper until she was sure they wrapped around her spine. Her vision failed and dissolved into the color of nothing and then filled with black, and she felt her soul peel away from her body like a bandage from a fresh wound. She hadn't expected that.

To describe any of it was to diminish it. There was nothing she could say to Viridi to prepare her.

"You will have a different time of it," the Harlot said, pouring a cup of tea for the spymaster. "I've never been to the Eternal Sun."

"You presume I will go there." Viridi said, sipping the tea. Presume is all we can do, the Harlot thought, but she did not say so to Viridi.

The Harlot brought the spyglass to one eye as she waited for the cart bearing Viridi's body to catch up. ErIkazar spread out like a patchwork quilt of crops and rolling dirt roads below her. The house at the foot of the hill looked tight and cozy, snuggled into fields of harvested winter wheat and

ripening barley. Peering through the spyglass, the Harlot trowncd.

“We’d better hurry,” she said. “They look like they’re getting ready to lock up for the night.”

“Don’t you think we might be better off some place where they’re a little less skittish?” her companion, a thin man in patched robes, said. “I’m assuming they’re the sort to ask where we’re from, where we’re going ... what we’re transporting.”

The Harlot collapsed the spyglass and slipped it into her saddlebag. She looked back at the Shepherd, driving the cart. The cart that carried the shrouded corpse of Viridi.

“If they ask, we’ll tell them,” she said. “It’s not as if they’ve never buried anyone before.”

“So who are you supposed to be?” the Shepherd asked. “Especially if they get a peck at Viridi. No one’s going to believe you’re a Turmishan woman’s daughter.”

“Why not?” The Harlot spurred her horse forward. “Blood does funny things. Maybe Viridi took up with a Dalesman.”

“So that’s the story you want to use. You’re her daughter, and I’m□”

“Loyal servant?”

“I was going to say son-in-law,” the Shepherd said. “But servant works too.”

“We tell the truth, except the names. We’re coming from Amn, heading to Turmish. Carrying Viridi home.”

“She’s already home,” the Shepherd said, and the Harlot rolled her eyes. She didn’t want to start that conversation again.

“You’ll let slip your cover with that kind of talk.”

“Yes, mistress.” The Harlot looked back over her shoulder at the Shepherd with his cheeky smile. She didn’t know him well—out of professional courtesy, more than anything—but he had the look of a Calishite, all brown skin and bright eyes. A small scar curled the corner of his lip so he always seemed to be laughing at the Harlot. His teeth were very white.

When she’d packed the wagon and laid Viridi’s body in the bed of it, he’d insisted on coming with her—even though she protested it would be dangerous.

“I trust you’ll keep me safe,” he’d said, with that scar-crooked smile. “And I might be helpful.”

The Harlot reined her horse in so she rode even with the cart. “I’m serious, Shepherd. These people might be unsophisticated, but they’ll recognize a preacher’s line when they hear it.”

“I know how to keep a cover,” he said. “I may have worked fewer jobs than you, but I’m no greenling.”

The Harlot smiled wanly to herself. “Yes, your talents are more useful inside the House.”

“Were,” the Shepherd corrected her. “Mistress.”

A trill of anxiety ran up her spine. Were—he wouldn’t be resurrecting her any time soon. She wet her lips and urged

the horse forward.

They frilled their story with enough lies to make it sound as if the two spies were respectable people, people you invited into your home and fed stew and summer ale, people you talked about the weather and the crops and the road from Amn with, and possibly people you sent on their way the next morning with bread, cheese, and a little more of that summer ale.

The old farmer didn't want to hear it. His eyes were hard as the dirt road beneath the horses' hooves, packed solid by years and hard wear, and his mouth was a bleak furrow. It took the Harlot miserably shaking two gold coins out of her purse and offering them with all the weariness and grief she felt plain on her face. All that got the spies was the barn for the night, and a terse reminder to bar the doors.

They drove the wagon in. and as they were bidden, barred the double doors behind.

"Charming," the Shepherd said, wading into a drift of hay. A cow lowed from the dark stables in the corner. "I didn't ask for your opinion," the Shepherd replied.

The Harloi smiled, (hough this time she meant it. "I never would have thought the castellan of House Sclcmchant easier to play than a bunch of farmers. Better than the open fields though."

"Speak for yourself," he said. "In the fields, at least the air is fresh and my prayers go straight to the Moonmaiden."

The Harlot had been digging her own bed in the hay, but she stopped when he spoke. Such a simple detail—to anyone else it might have seemed innocuous. "Sclune. Is that who you worship?"

The Shepherd snorted. "Took you long enough to work it out. You've had her blessing enough times."

"I've no more witnessed your skills than your sacraments have. You don't seem like a silverstar."

"And you don't seem like a harlot," he said mildly.

She shrugged. "Nor you a shepherd."

"I am, of sorts," he said. "Find the lost little lambs and bring them home to the Moonmaiden." He grinned. "Or Viridi, as the case may be. There are worse cryptonyms for me. How did you choose yours?"

"I didn't," she said, settling into the hay. "Viridi chose it. Said my body was my trade."

The Shepherd chuckled. "That sounds like Viridi's sense of humor."

Grief closed around the Harlot like a cloak. Her eyes welled with tears before she could wipe them away. She looked up and found the Shepherd watching her.

"I miss her," the Harlot admitted. "More than I expected."

"Me too," he said. "Our lives will be very different without Viridi." They sat silently for a long time. "Perhaps," the Shepherd said, "you could tell me your name? Start our lives without Viridi right?"

The Harlot shook her head. "It's too dangerous."

"It was. Are you afraid of me, then?" Again, that cheeky smile.

"You?" the Harlot said. "I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid of much at all. these days."

The Shepherd clucked his tongue and dug his bed in the hay. "You say that, but we both know it's not true. I think you fear death."

The Harlot laughed. "Oh. Shepherd. Do you know how many times I've died?" "Fourteen, I believe."

"Fourteen times, I've felt my soul part from my bones. Fourteen times I've woken in the Fugue Plane, forgetful and lost. Fourteen times, I've looked upon the City of Judgment. I have mastered my death. I do not fear a fifteenth."

"Viridi's no longer as free with her diamonds as she once was," the Shepherd said quietly. "The fifteenth may be permanent."

"It may."

The Shepherd regarded her seriously. "Harlot. I say this to you not as a colleague, but as a silverstar, acutely concerned with the state of your soul. We cannot say where Viridi is now, but you can determine where you will go one day. Is it the emptiness of the Fugue Plane?"

"Tonight," the Harlot told him. "I intend to go only one place to sleep."

What she did not tell him was that most nights she dreamed of her killers: the man from Tethyr, the assassin from the mountains in the East, the black-feathered kenku from Durpar, the genasi warlord in Mornon. A wizard in Amn and a second wizard in Waterdeep. The chancellor in Aglarond. The necromancer who had killed her not twelve leagues from where they slept that very night. Every one had died

once the Harlot had risen and given her evidence, her voice still raw from the grave.

The man from Tethyr was the only time she'd fought, and later he was the only killer she'd gone to see executed. His planned crimes—so frightening to the still-fragile kingdom—earned him a public execution on a warm Kythorn day. The man mounted the steps with appalling arrogance, but as the judge read the charges and the executioner took his place, the man's eyes met the Harlot's—the eyes of the woman he'd watched die, the woman whose body he'd thrown in the bay. He shook even after they cut off his head.

The worst of the worst—every one had thought their plans were incalculable, inscrutable, unstoppable. She saw it in the way their eyes widened when they caught her—a map, a letter, a potion gripped in her guilty hand—and the way that shock gave way to smugness as her vision went black. She might have found a way through their defenses, but now their plans were as foolproof as they ever were.

After all, they were the smart ones. She was just a stupid thief and dead besides.

“But suppose,” Viridi had said when she had offered the Harlot the job—when the Harlot had been just a stupid thief who knew a lot about breaking into houses and not a lot about the wider world. “Suppose you went into that stronghold and heard his plans, observed his schemes. Ferreted out the evidence we needed to convict.

“You could slip out now, but chances are your quarry would realize you were there and all his schemes would change. The evidence would be useless. So instead, maybe you take a bag of coins or a bauble for pretense. You break something, or slip into the wrong room and he catches you.

He cuts your throat. He burns the body. He's eradicated any threat he believed you possessed.

"But you aren't gone at all," Viridi said, "because we kept a little part of you—say your little finger. Cut it right off at the joint there, and gave it to our cleric. From it, we would resurrect

you, hale and whole, right in this room—all your memories sound and your testimony ... extremely valuable."

The Harlot had thought her mad. but Viridi gave her little choice. After all, it was Viridi's house that the Harlot had broken into that evening. She could become the resurrection agent or another body disposed of in the back alleys of Amn. Not much of a choice.

Even so, the Harlot spent the long night thinking of a plane of formless gray mist and the judgment of the gods while staring at her hands and her little fingers, slender and easy to snip as tulip stems.

In the dark of the barn, the Harlot startled from an uneasy sleep full of dark shapes and wicked spells and the feeling of a knife piercing her heart.

And the sound of something brushing against wood.

She reached automatically for her sword, only to remember it was packed in the cart. Her hand found the hilt of her dagger, tucked into her boot. Her pulse pounded in her throat, but she couldn't hear what had waked her. Her eyes adjusted to the light of the full moon cutting lines in between the boards of the barn walls.

A light that outlined several dark shapes pacing just beyond the walls.

"Shepherd," she whispered. Eight steps to the wagon and her sword under the scat. There. The Shepherd had his chain. She wondered if he'd been smart enough to sleep with it.

"Shepherd!" The Harlor rolled to her left. heart pounding, eyes on the shapes pacing the walls—long, shaggy shapes. Dogs, if she was lucky.

In Erlkazar. the Harlot thought, it wouldn't be dogs.

"Shepherd!"

Behind her, the Shepherd stirred and coughed loudly enough to be heard back in Amn, and the Harlor cursed Viridi for keeping him in the House and blunting his skills.

"Shut up and get over here!" she whispered. "I need a spell!"

At least he remembered to creep through the straw to the side of the wagon. "What spell?" he whispered. "What's going on?"

"Something's out there." she said. "Hunting us."

The Shepherd crept forward and placed his eye to the crack. "Are you certain?" he said. "They look like—"

Something threw itself against the wall. It scrabbled against the boards, snarling. The Shepherd fell back. Its comrades bayed—a sound as unlike a dog's bark as a banshee's scream was a woman's—and the shadows beyond the wall clustered around the buckling boards.

"Our Lady," the Shepherd swore. "What spell?"

“Find out if they’re alive.” The Harlot buckled her sword on. “After that, whatever you can think of.”

“Alive?” An edge of panic crept into his voice. “Why in the Hells would they be anything else?”

“Shepherd.” the Harlot said gently, though the wall was starting to splinter, “you are not allowed to panic. Undead or alive—that’s a very important distinction, and I know you can make it. Ask your questions later.”

The Shepherd nodded, and to his credit, pulled his silver amulet from his collar without hesitating, and started praying.

The Harlot positioned herself beside the wall, sword ready, muscles coiled. If he didn’t hurry, the wall would burst. The hounds would be on them before either could scream and it wouldn’t matter if they were dogs or something worse. The Harlot’s mind turned to the peeling sensation of her soul fleeing this plane, and she shook her head. Not now.

Instead she thought of the streets of Ankhapur, of fighting with the curs for her share of the scraps: aim for the chin.

aim for the eyes, don’t pull away if you’re bitten. Hard lessons learned young.

The Shepherd’s amulet glowed silver as his pleas to the Moonmaiden intensified. The hound’s body crashed into the wall again, cracking one of the planks. Snarling, it scrabbled at the hole.

“Now, Shepherd.”

“Wait.”

The beast's muzzle—its snapping yellowed teeth so close the Shepherd could have touched them—burst through the hole. The wood creaked and splintered.

“Shepherd!”

Then a snap and the damaged board gave way. The Shepherd cried the name of his goddess. A corona of silver light exploded outward, momentarily blinding the Harlot. The hound whined and hit the wall with a heavy thud.

Dark spots still crowding her sight, the Harlot swung the of her sword deep into its neck. No blood poured from the wound. The hound yelped though and snapped at her.

The Harlot twisted her dagger into the beast's mouth so it bit down on the blade rather than her arm and kicked it squarely in the soft underjaw. It screamed again and fell still.

“Undead,” the Shepherd said, standing. The creature at their feet was shaped like a rangy wolf, but the flesh of its limbs was tattered and its teeth protruded from rotten gums. “We have only a moment. I might have hit the others.”

The Harlot kicked the broken boards from the hole. Outside. Selune was full and bright as a second sun. She eyed the fallen pack as she squeezed through, the wood scraping her back as she did. There were two more, prone and scintillating with the remnants of the Shepherd's spell. She cut the nearest one's throat—

The fourth hound hit her before she heard it snarl. Its yellowed

teeth clamped down on the forearm she'd instinctively thrown up. Her sword fell to the grass.

The pain was beyond name, and the Harlot screamed before she could get her wits together. The hound loosed its hold, trying to bite down harder, foul-smelling saliva streaming from its maw. The Harlot shoved her arm deeper into the hound's jaws. Much as it hurt, it was better than the zombie dog's teeth around her throat. The hound scuttled backward, releasing her arm and crouching low as if preparing to leap on her again. Her blood stained its muzzle red.

Growling behind her—the remaining hound had recovered.

Memories of Ankhapur prickled at the back of the Harlot's mind, tickling old scars. Don't move, she thought. Don't run. Don't make eye contact—

The hound behind slammed into her back, knocking the Harlot to the ground and reminding her these were no mere dogs. The hound with the bloodied muzzle leaped forward.

Silver split the night chased by the Shepherd's rising prayer. The hound with the bloodied muzzle skittered back, but a missile of light sliced the air over the Harlot, and the second hound hit the ground in a burst of the Shepherd's magic. The silver light rushed over the Harlot, and she felt the burning pain of her arm and back cool a little.

"Get up!" the Shepherd shouted, uncoiling his chain from his waist. The weapon shimmered with the power of his goddess. "Shar hrest you, get out of the way!"

The Harlot rolled to her feet, but as soon as she did, the bloody-muzzled hound was on her again. It leaped at her, and she fell to the side, bringing her foot up hard to its stomach. The hound's belly cracked like a wasp's nest. It yelped, and the Harlot pulled her foot back hard, snapping a row of its ribs.

Her sword still lay in the grass behind her, flashing in the light of the Shepherd's powers. The other beast had fallen.

Her hound still had the strength to leap at her again, aiming for her throat. She threw up her injured arm, deliberately this time, and twisted into the beast, all her weight forced against the hound.

"Shepherd!" she shouted. She pinned the hound on its back, but the damn thing wouldn't release her arm. She kneed it in the hole she'd broken, the jagged edges of its ribs threatening to break through her leathers. "Sword!"

She looked over her shoulder, in time to see the Shepherd's chain sizzle through the air like a lightning bolt. It cracked against the hound's crumbling hide. Scraps of skin and death-dried muscle exploded outward. The hound's jaws clamped down on the Harlot's arm, but when she gave into her instincts and pulled away, the creature's head broke loose.

"Shar's nails!" The Shepherd looked pale.

"Sword, please," the Harlot said. His eyes not leaving the hound's head, he scooped the sword off the grass and tossed it at her feet. "Thank you."

"Will you stop being so stlarning calm!"

She chuckled. "I let people kill me for a living, Shepherd. I've been through worse." She used the sword to pry the thing's jaws apart. Her nerves were screaming up and down her arm, but the bite felt curiously numb. Pulling her sleeve up, she saw the wound had blackened, the zombie dog's bite eating deeply into her skin.

For all her bravado, the Harlot's gorge rose.

“Here.” The Shepherd, his hand shaking, laid his fingertips on the filthy wound. He murmured something, and the rotten skin fell away. New clean flesh sealed over the wound. Though the burning pain faded, the Harlot’s arm still ached. She dreaded wielding her sword. She looked up at the Shepherd’s bright eyes.

“Better?”

“Much.” She pulled her arm back. “Many thanks.” Her heart was still pounding, ready for the next fight. “There might be others.”

“Other what? What were those?” the Shepherd asked. “And how in the Hells did you know they wouldn’t be dogs?”

She hesitated. “I’ve been to Erkkazar before.”

The Shepherd stared at her. “Harlot, stop being coy with me. You think you’re good at hiding your thoughts, but I’ve known you too long.”

The Harlot sighed. “All right, but let’s get back inside first.”

“Hold on,” the Shepherd said. “My chain.”

The Harlot cursed under her breath and started for the barn. They only had to hold out another hour or so. until the sun came up. But until then they were in the sights of all manner of dangerous creatures: Erkkazar’s Night Barony and its leader, Saestra Karanok.

Once, nearly five winters before, the Harlot had been hired to do a job in Erkkazar by Saestra. Her Night Barony—a collective of vampires, thieves, and murderers who struck unwary caravans and wandering soldiers—harbored a serpent, a rebel convincing bandits to turn against Saestra.

A rebel too clever for the vampire baroness—the Harlot was tasked with finding the traitor where Saestra and her loyal followers could not.

Every night of that assignment the Harlot feared being changed by the vampire's powerful bite. If the Harlot had had her way, she would never have set foot in ErIkazar again, lest she run afoul of the Night Barony.

Seliine was drifting down behind the trees—sunrise would be soon. They had to be ready to get as far from here as possible before the next sunset.

At the barn doors, she looked back and saw she was alone. She turned to hurry the Shepherd along.

The Shepherd stood stock-still, his chain looped once around his waist. Creeping toward him like a patient leopard was a woman in snug leather armor, her hair pulled into a tight queue so blonde it was nearly white. Her skin was pale too—peculiarly

so, as if the skin were too thin to carry blood—and her face had a vulpine look to it. Vampire.

“Is this your work, human?” she said, her voice like the sound of a dirge, haunting and melodic and full of pleasant doom. “Are you the one who killed my gravehounds?” The Shepherd didn't answer.

Hells, he's enthralled, the Harlot thought as she ducked behind the corner of the barn. The creature's eyes never left the Shepherd. Behind the vampire, lost in the mist rising from the creek, were two other figures. She drew her sword, very slowly, biting her lip at the pain in her arm. She would manage—better than manage, she would defeat the vampire.

You must, she told herself. There's no room to fail.

The vampire reached down to pat the head of one of the fallen gravehounds, whose leg had burned away in the Shepherd's silver light. "Look at my baby. I can't fix this," she said, half to herself.

A memory snagged the Harlot's thoughts. That voice sliding through the dark night... piercing the white mists ... taunting her ... taunting Saestra ... piercing her chest...

"Reshka," the Harlor said to no one but the night, and the cold hand of fear wrapped its fingers around her heart. Her sword arm dropped.

At the sound, the blonde vampire whipped her head up, baring her fangs at the shadows. "I can hear you," she sang. "Might as well come out."

It's not Reshka, the Harlot thought. It can't be. Reshka isn't a vampire. Reshka is dead. Saestra agreed—Find what I can't and I'll kill the traitor myself

The vampire seized the Shepherd by the collar of his robe, her claws slicing into the fabric. The air around the vampire began to ripple as she drew a spell together. "Come out, or I'll make his death a slow—"

The Shepherd raised his hand, the silver of the amulet glinting in the center of his fist. An explosion of silver light blinded the Harlot yet again. The vampire screamed as the blessing threw her backward, into the wheat stalks.

The Harlot sprinted from her hiding place, pushing the shock to one side. If it was Reshka, the spell she'd been casting was only the start. The Shepherd needed help. She wouldn't be afraid.

Or foolish—she sheathed her sword and caught the Shepherd by the arm. “The barn!” she shouted. “Quickly!” She pulled him along behind her and raced back to their refuge.

The cold wind of the grave curled through her hair as she ran, as if a portal to the Fugue Plane were opening wide behind her. Her arm howled with pain. They reached the doors, and only once the Shepherd was inside and her grip tight on the edge of the door did she dare look back.

The vampire rose, drawing a wand from her belt as she did. Her eyes fell on the Harlot, and she paused, looking surprised. She looked the Harlot over once and started to laugh, a sound that erased every doubt from the Harlot’s mind.

“Is that really you?” the vampire called, sauntering toward the barn. “I don’t suppose you recognize me.”

“Reshka,” the Harlot said, her voice as soft as the wind in the wheat stalks. She rubbed the grain of the wood under her fingers, unwilling to shut the door just yet.

“The very same.” Reshka stopped still twelve or fifteen paces from the Harlot. “Though much improved, despite your best efforts.”

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

“And so are you. Time and the Weave make fools of us all. What a tasty pet you’ve picked up! Does he know any other tricks!” “Leave him be,” the Harlot said.

“Or what?” Reshka said. “There’s nothing you can do to me that’s worse than what you’ve already done.”

“I could kill you.”

Reshka smiled. "I have some new pets of my own, you know. Na!"

One of the creatures behind her. its precise form lost in the mist, raised its head like a hound hearing its master's whistle.

"Come here. There's someone you should meet." She kept her eyes locked on the Harlot's, as the creature loped forward.

It was a wight. In life, it had been a woman. Its brittle hair was long and dusty brown. The skin that stretched over its face had a blue, rotted cast, but the bones beneath ... the sharp curve of its nose, the wide cheekbones ...

The Harlot looked down at the wight's hand.

The smallest finger was missing.

"This is Na," Reshka said, though her voice sounded far away and tinny. The wight's hate-filled black eyes found the Harlot's and threatened to suck her in. "Na, this is ... an old friend of mine. And yours too," she added.

The wight came close enough to sniff the Harlot—never in her darkest nightmares could she have imagined the horror that shuddered through her. She forgot Reshka, she forgot the second shape in the mist, she forgot even the Shepherd standing behind her.

Only Na, with her cruelly familiar face and her missing finger.

That is my hair, the Harlot thought. That is the scar on my cheek from Old Hassan's ring when he hit me for stealing an

apple. That is my collarbone, the one I broke falling from my first breakin. That is my hand, just before I am raised.

That is my face, the Harlot thought, unable to do anything but grip the door tightly, when I am dead and rotted.

“She smells,” Na said, “... familiar.”

“Indeed.” Reshka set a hand on her servant’s shoulder and leaned in conspiratorial!). “Don’t you recognize her? She’s the

one who took your soul. You died, they put your soul in her body, and you were left for me.”

Na looked as startled as the Harlot felt, and for a moment the wight stood still, her eyes flitting over the Harlot’s features. But her wrinkled face quickly contorted in rage. She bared her teeth and screamed, a sound that sent a razor’s edge down the Harlot’s spine.

“Mine!” she shrieked. Her intact fingers were sharply clawed—black and curved as a raven’s talons—and they came down at the Harlot with surprising speed, gouging her newly healed arm. The Harlot scrambled back into the barn. “Give it!” Na screamed, tripping as she came after her. “Mine!”

“Stop,” Reshka said.

Mercifully, the wight froze—compelled, the Harlot realized. Reshka stepped into the barn, beside her creation. She brushed a long strand of hair back.

“I don’t want her dead yet,” she said. “Wound her all you like, but I want her alive, understood?”

The wight's eyes didn't leave the Harlot, but she nodded stiffly. The Harlot's hand shook as she tried to draw her sword and dagger.

Reshka turned back to the Harlot. "I trusted you," she said. "Twice over you betrayed me. That means I get twice the revenge—still one death left. And I will—"

Silver light exploded. While the Harlot had forgotten the Shepherd, he had remembered her. The wight screamed again, but this time Reshka's voice joined her as the light of Selunc's favor burned through them.

The Harlot's ears rang.

Just swing, she told herself as she drew her sword.

The far wall cracked again, and a second vampire—a muscular half-elf—broke through, his claws snapping the dry wood. The Harlot spun around. "Shepherd!" she shouted.

He had scrambled up the ladder to the loft. He turned when she shouted, his eyes widening not at the male vampire, but at something behind her. His hands went up and the silver light that coursed from them struck the wight, but not before it had sunk its claws into her back.

If the gravehound's bite had burned, this was red-hot irons of Dis dragging across her skin. The poison of its claws felt like fire in her veins.

Then silver light hit them both and she heard the wight scream and felt its claws fall from her back. The fire cooled but her arms still ached.

She turned and cut an arc through the air, toward Na. The wight twisted out of the way and scrambled back to its feet.

The Harlot felt a strong arm seize her around the ribcage and a damp breath touch her neck. The vampire spawn's clawed hand seized her hair and tried to wrench her head to the side.

She dropped the sword and pulled her dagger. She struggled against the vampire, twisting until she could get a good angle. She plunged the dagger over and over into its lower back, and it crumbled as easily as the gravehounds.

"Kill the priest!" Reshka shouted.

"No!" The Harlot lunged in front of the wight. Pain burst across her chest like lightning, nearly bringing tears to her eyes. The spawn had cracked one of her ribs. She threw herself into Na's path despite it, but the wight wasn't headed for the Shepherd.

Na plowed into her, knocking the Harlot onto her stomach. The wight's claws ripped through the Harlot's leather armor, infecting her further, and sapping her strength. She bucked under the wight, succeeding only in turning over and giving Na a better reach at her throat.

"Damn it, Na!" the Harlot heard Reshka shriek. Another bolt of silver shimmered past. The Shepherd had to be exhausted by now. The sheen of eldritch power illuminated the doorway of the barn.

Fear drove the Harlot now—raw fear untempered by skill or knowledge. She was going to die. Her own hands—the hands she gripped and tried to force away—would be what killed her. Her own eyes would watch as her breath ebbed.

She kicked at Na's legs, but couldn't find purchase against the slick straw to throw her off". She twisted the wight's

wrists—Na only took the chance to lean closer, her breath smelling of turned earth and rotten meat. Panic Hooding all of her senses, the Harlot jerked her head up into the wight's face with a sickening crack. Na howled and her grip loosened long enough for the Harlot to break free and get back to her feet. She kicked the wounded wight onto its back and snatched her sword off the ground.

A crackling bolt of magic streaked across the room, filling the air with the smell of brimstone. It struck the Shepherd with a fleshy thud. He gasped wetly and fell from the ladder, landing on the hay strewn ground, unmoving but still breathing.

The Harlot stepped between Reshka and the Shepherd's body. Reshka was breathing heavily and favoring one leg, clearly hurling from the Shepherd's prayers. A spell danced between her fingers, purple and black.

Suddenly the eldritch light spread and suffused Reshka's body. When it faded, she straightened and smiled.

Hells—the Harlot couldn't hold out long against the two of them.

"She broke my face," Na said. "I want to kill her now."

"Five years," Reshka said, stepping past the wight. "I will savor this." Reshka paused beside the cart and ran her hand lightly over the shroud. "And what have we here?"

"Get away from that!" The Harlot lurched forward. The poison from the wight's claws rushed to her head. Na jumped between them.

Reshka peeled back the shroud and considered the body beneath for a moment, before she started to laugh. "The

Turmishan spymaster? What a pleasant gift!" Her red eyes danced. "Better revenge than I could have asked"

A jolt went through Reshka. Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head. The shake became a shudder, and the vampire winced. She grasped the side of the cart. "Stop."

Na jerked her head toward the vampire.

"Saestra calls," Reshka said. "We must return."

"No!" the wight howled. "I want what's mine."

Reshka sneered at the Harlot, who held her sword with both bloodied arms, as if assessing her next move.

Reshka was stronger, the Harlot realized. Reshka would kill her in the end. The best she could hope for was to make it difficult for the vampire.

Another shudder racked Reshka as her mistress and former enemy compelled her to return. The Harlot didn't lower her sword.

Il the Harlot moved, she was certain she would collapse. Na would be on her in an instant. Reshka had to see the way the Harlot's hands shook, the way sweat beaded on her brow.

You'll be dead any minute, a voice whispered in her mind. And so will the Shepherd.

Reshka shuddered once more and gave a little screech of frustration. "Fine!" she said. "I can't have you, I'll take your mistress." She flinched again as the summons came. "Godsdamnit. Na, take the body."

The wight's gaze did not leave the Harlot, and she growled low in her throat. Na stepped toward the wounded spy.

And froze again.

"I said," Reshka hissed, "take the body." "She will leave," the wight said, struggling against the compulsion. "I want what's mine."

"Patience," Reshka said. "She won't get far." She watched the Harlot as Na gathered up Viridi's body. "What? No heroic gestures?"

"Not yet," she said, forcing her voice to remain even. Inside, she was a tumult of panic and relief; they were taking Viridi, but that meant she would live.

Reshka smiled. "Next time then." She twisted a ring on her finger and she, Na, and Viridi's corpse vanished.

There were rules to hiring the resurrection agent.

To begin with, the Harlot cost five thousand dragons upon hiring, followed by another seven thousand when the information proved out.

"For you, dear," Viridi used to tell her, "they must be at their last resources, but not their last coin."

That was the price for a "safe" mission, the sort the Harlot accepted without question. Saestra Karanok had spent eighteen thousand golden dragons for the Harlot to single out her enemies.

"That's higher than I'd heard," she'd said, as she sat in Viridi's salon.

"It's a challenging job," Viridi answered. The Harlot watched from a spyhole concealed in the woodwork. That was the second rule: the client could not meet the Harlot or seek her out. Usually, she couldn't see the clients either. If her killer were clever, they might speak with her corpse. The less she knew the better.

"With this one," Viridi had said to her, "you need to know everything you can."

Through the eyeholes, the Harlot watched Viridi settle herself into a high-backed chair and settle her features into a cold mask. She watched the door open and a groom usher in a woman in heavy red robes. The woman lowered the hood, revealing flawless—if pale—skin and dark waves of hair. She was young.

barely twenty, the Harlot guessed. She eyed Viridi as if she were a part of the furniture.

"Lady Karanok," Viridi said mildly. "I hope your trip was pleasant."

"I wouldn't know," the woman said airily. "The view's the same no matter where I go."

"Better than the alternative. Please, sit." Viridi gestured at the opposite chair. Saestra Karanok stared at Viridi for a long moment, then wordlessly turned to look at the far wall—the wall the Harlot watched from, the very spot the Harlot watched from. Her gaze speared the Harlot. Her eyes were bloody red.

A vampire, the Harlot thought. Oh holy gods, a vampire.

"Is that her?" Saestra said. "She's the one you're offering?"

“That depends,” Viridi said, pouring two small glasses of cordial, “on what you need. My agents have very particular skills. Most people don’t need that one.”

Lady Karanok watched the Harlot for a moment longer, as if the wall weren’t there, as if the space between them had closed. The Harlot felt naked before that gaze, as if Lady Karanok had stripped away her clothes, her skin, her muscle, layer by layer.

She turned back to Viridi. “One of my own plots against me,” she said. “I have done what I can to root out the traitor, but I bring the cleverest to my fold—this one has eluded me. It cannot stand.”

“The mistress of the house must control her own children,” Viridi said.

Lady Karanok scowled at Viridi. “It isn’t one of my children. There are humans who follow me as well—and I need their skills. I need the instigator. I need an example.”

The Harlot’s heart pounded in her throat. Could the Shepherd bring her back from Lady Karanok’s bite?

“This,” Viridi said after a moment, “I may be able to help you with.”

“The resurrection agent.”

Viridi smiled, but the Harlot knew she was surprised. It was inevitable that knowledge of the Harlot would spread. Neither had expected it would be so soon.

“If you wish,” Viridi said. “I need assurances, of course.”

Lady Karanok waved her hand dismissively. "I know your terms. I wouldn't have come here without knowing them."

"One extra for you, my lady: my agent doesn't become one of your... children."

"I'm more discriminating than that," Saestra said.

Viridi sipped her cordial. "And you're willing to do away with the traitor? Regardless of his or her identity."

Saestra gripped the arms of her chair, and the Harlot could see her fingers were long and strong. "Find what I can't and I'll kill the traitor myself."

"Let me speak with the agent," Viridi said. "I will send word in the morning through the same gentleman whom you contacted."

"Very well." They both stood. "Good evening, spymaster. Agent." The Harlot shivered again.

"It seems like a poor plan," the Harlot said when she slipped out the secret door. "Why would you make a deal with ... that creature?"

"She's more than a vampire," Viridi said. "Saestra Karanok controls ErIkazar."

"ErIkazar has a king."

"In name. If he's not one of Saestra's spawn, he's loyal to her in other ways." Viridi walked the Harlot back to her room. "If you take this job, what he is to her is just one bit of information you could get me. But I won't pretend it will be easy."

"It's never easy," the Harlot said. They paused in the doorway.

"If you're afraid, we don't need this commission," Viridi said. "I'd rather you not make mistakes in Saestra's realm because

your nerves get the better of you." She patted the Harlot's arm. "Think on it. I need an answer in the morning."

The Harlot had drawn a hot bath, scrubbed the plaster and filth and the feeling of the vampire's eyes from her skin, and thought about Viridi's proposal and the blood red eyes of Saestra Karanok.

A challenge. The Harlot had sunk down in the water, until it covered her nose. She would not be afraid.

The Harlot's heart pounded in her throat as the Shepherd stirred, the sticky dregs of a healing potion staining the corner of his mouth. His eyes fluttered open, and he looked up at the Harlot.

"What?" He coughed. "What happened?"

"You fell off the ladder," the Harlot said. "Stand up. Let's see if you can walk."

"Give me a moment," he said. He sat up uneasily. "Wait ... wasn't there?"

"We need to get out of here. I need to know if you can ride."

"I'll lie in the cart," he said. "Where?"

"The cart will slow us down." She hauled him to his feet. "Hrast, Shepherd, come on!"

The Shepherd stood uneasily. "Don't you curse at me. How do you know ... Hrast! That was a vampire."

The Harlot turned on him. "Yes, and she took Viridi!"

The Shepherd stopped. "What?"

"She took Viridi. We have to go after them."

"Son of a barghest," he swore softly. He crossed to the horses, limping slightly. "Are you sure you know where she's gone? Who is she? And that ... creature?"

"It was a wight," the Harlot said. My wight, she thought, and all at once the shock untaveled her guts, her tendons, her resolve.

"Easy!" The Shepherd caught her as her knees buckled. "Sit! Oh Hells, you're in worse shape than I am."

"I'm fine," the Harlot said, but her voice shook.

"Your arm again?" The Shepherd unbuckled the mangled bracer and examined the wound. "You have to stop using it as a shield. I have some salve—it should hold you until I'm tcccling well enough to bless it."

"It... she got my back as well."

She felt him prod at the cuts. "Broke the skin. Hrast. You'll need more than salve."

The Harlot hardly heard him. I'm not afraid of much at all these days, she'd said. We both know that's not true, he'd said. / think you fear death. She hadn't, she thought, not until her own corpse had stared into her eyes and squeezed

her throat right down to the bone. Na's screams echoed in her thoughts. The Harlot shuddered.

Perhaps it wasn't true. Perhaps Na was a ruse, a close-enough likeness with a missing finger meant to frighten her. It might not even be possible to achieve what Na implied.

The Shepherd knelt beside her and opened a jar of ointment. The smell of peppermint and lemon made the Harlot's eyes water and her nostrils tingle.

"Shepherd," she said as he spread the ointment on her arm. "Could someone else... use one of my bodies? Make something undead out of it?"

"I suppose so. Here, unbuckle your brigandine and I'll put some on your back." She did and he smoothed the cool salve over her scratches. "Provided it didn't require your soul to be bound. But it would take a very powerful..." He trailed off. "Shar pass us over that ... thing. It was missing a finger."

"Reshka is a very powerful necromancer," the Harlot said, finishing his sentence. She pulled her armor back on.

The Shepherd nodded, looking distracted as if he were trying

to decide what to say. "We'd better get going," he finally said. Whatever he'd been thinking, he was keeping it to himself.

"Reshka belongs to Saestta Karanok," the Harlot said, and she noticed her voice was still unsteady. "I targeted her once. A job. I've been to Erkazar before. Because Saestra paid me to find Reshka." She closed her eyes against the shock that still rattled her nerves. No, she thought. You can't

be afraid. "Reshka will have returned to the Night Vault. The best entrance is half a day's ride. Saestra and all her bandits will be there. But they'll be sleeping in a deeper part of the caverns."

"So will Reshka and whatever she's created."

The Harlot took several deep breaths, one hand on the pommel, one on the cantle of the saddle. "How long do we have," she asked, "before Reshka can make... can change Viridi..."

"She can't," the Shepherd said, mounting the draft horse. "Not until winter, at least." He wagged his fingers at her. "Better skills inside the House, remember? Viridi won't corrupt, not by nature and not by Reshka's hand."

The Harlot felt her heart unclench. "She's safe?"

"From becoming undead, yes. But if Reshka's as talented as you say, that's the least of our worries. She could raise her."

The Harlot shook her head. "Viridi wouldn't come."

"She might not have a choice. But even if she couldn't, there are rituals to speak with the corpse."

The Harlot blew out a long breath. "And Viridi's corpse knows a lot of secrets."

"Precisely." He looked at her gravely. "Besides, neither of us would leave her."

"No." The Harlot mounted her horse. "We'd better get going then." The Shepherd turned his horse into her path.

"I need to tell you something," the Shepherd said.

"Is it about the gods?" the Harlot replied testily.

"No, but if you want to talk about that before we die, I'd"

"We're not going to die." But she wasn't sure about that. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to"

"Shepherd, I'm not interested. Take your preaching elsewhere." Her horse pranced nervously and she patted its neck to calm it. They'd had this discussion a dozen times since Viridi died. What business was it of his whether her soul passed to the Gates of the Moon or the Fugue Plane or away from creation entirely?

"I'm not forcing you to do anything but accept that you need to think about it," he said. "You can follow whomever you want, but you've been to the Fugue Plane. You know what awaits you. Why are you avoiding it?"

The Harlot laughed bitterly. "I know what I am. Selune wouldn't want me—what decent god would? What's the point of bending and scraping only to be left behind? Better to evade death."

He came to stand beside her. "You can't do that forever."

"I can do it for a while," she said, and kicked her horse forward and to the north.

The hard ride didn't drive away her anger the way she'd hoped it would. It was so easy for the Shepherd to assume what she needed and tell her to make a decision. She'd been to the Fugue Plane, true. But she'd never seen another soul there. And she'd never seen a god's messenger come, especially not for her.

She had heard the whispers of devils, the promises they made. Come with us, escape their trap, take the power. Sweet voices, sweet as the gods should sound, but what she knew they would take in return wasn't worth giving. She wondered what Selune would ask in rerurn.

She shivered. She'd nearly died in Na's cold grip. She'd felt her vision starting to crumble at its edges.

The fifteenth may be permanent, the Shepherd had said, and. Will you stop being so stlarning calm!

What is it like to <//r? Viridi had asked. Did she reside now in Waukeen's market? Did her soul peer down from the Eternal Sun? The Harlot's heart felt heavy. She didn't know. She couldn't know.

They had ridden nearly an hour when she heard the Shepherd's horse slow to a trot. She reined her own mount in and turned to see what was slowing him down.

The Shepherd was slumped forward in his saddle, wrists tangled in the reins. He was still conscious, she noticed as she pulled her horse alongside him, but barely. All things considered it was lucky he was alive.

"Idiot," she said, half to herself. Together they hobbled to a patch of grass beside the road. As she took his weight, the scratches on her back split open once more, and she winced. The Shepherd needed rest, and she needed his skills.

She gave him the last of her healing draughts and tucked a blanket around him. She stripped off her brigandine and folded it up to prop up her bad rib as she stretched out on her stomach. The breeze felt pleasant through her shirt. She closed her eyes, but she was too full of nervous energy to do more than doze fitfully.

It was only as she drifted off that she realized the Shepherd had never said what it was he needed to tell her.

The Harlot had once known better than to be afraid. Fear could slow you down, if you gave into it, and stop you from doing what needed to be done. If she had given into her fears, she would have died a thousand times before she even met Viridi—by sword, by spell, by exposure. Better not to think about what stands between you, she always told herself, and living until tomorrow.

The small cave off the Night Vault that Reshka had claimed for her own had been far from the center of the busy caverns, and close enough to an entrance to dissipate the strange odors and miasmic clouds that occasionally issued from the necromancer's

experiments. After several tendays of asking the right questions of the right people, the Harlot had been certain Reshka was orchestrating the upheaval in the Night Barony.

She tapped on the wooden slats hanging over the cave opening and nudged them open. A woman with pale blonde hair stood inside, leaning over a worktable. There was a dead goblin in front of her, its skin sliced open and pinned back to expose graying muscles. The smell of rough alcohol hung on the air. Reshka looked up.

"Good morning," she said. "Did you need something, or have you just come to chat?"

"A little of both."

"As usual, excuse the mess." She pulled a sheet over the goblin and crossed to a smaller table with two chairs. "Come. Have some tea."

The Harlot closed the door and sat across from her. She watched Reshka pour tea into clay cups, thinking all the while that the necromancer didn't deserve what was coming. She'd been surprised to find the implacable necromancer was the source of the rebellion, to be honest—surprised and disappointed. She liked Reshka.

But she'd been paid.

"I know you're behind it," she said.

Reshka raised an eyebrow and smiled blandly. "Behind what?" "Don't play me," the Harlot said. "You're the traitor Saestra wants."

Reshka's eyes tightened. "Sounds like someone's jumping to conclusions."

The Harlot leaned back, intentionally lackadaisical. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. I figure I'll let Saestra decide. She's offering quite the prize for ferreting the traitor out."

"So you'd give her my name?" Reshka chuckled. "Saestra is cleverer than to go around cutting down her allies just because

some neophyte wants to gain her good graces."

"She'll listen to me." The Harlot pulled a letter from her jerkin full of threats and propaganda. "It's a clever spell—as far as anyone can divine, your letters just appear, fully formed. They've tried all sorts of spells to drive out your identity. They're all thinking so hard"—she drew a second sheet, a list of spell components written in the same tidy handwriting—"they missed the obvious."

“You don’t understand what you’re playing at,” Reshka said after a moment. “Those of us who arc told we serve her at our own leisure, do nothing of the sort. She suffers us to live, and when we try to leave, Saestra gains another spawn.”

“Then perhaps you should offer mc something,” the Harlot said coolly. “Something better than the eight hundred dragons she’s promising.”

“Fool,” Reshka said. “Sacstra’s days are numbered. If I buy your loyalty, I buy it for a month at best.”

“Then pay up.”

Reshka stared at her for a long moment. She stood and went to a chest on the far side of the cave. “I had hopes for you,” she said at length. “A person of clear intelligence, of sterner stuff than those gold-hungry bandits or Sacstra’s fawning children. You could have been something in the new order. We might have been friends.”

Reshka returned with a sack full of coins that she tossed in the Harlot’s lap. The resurrection agent made a point of going through the coins, even though she knew Reshka had retrieved a knife along with them.

The Harlot turned and looked up at the necromancer.

“I’m sorry about this. If you left now,” she said, “no one would know.”

“No one will know now.” Reshka said calmly, and she pulled out the knife.

The Harlot started awake, and winced as she twisted her cuts in uncomfortable ways. Her whole body ached, and her ribs were screaming. She sat up gingerly.

The Shepherd was already up. A few charred loaves of flat-bread lay beside the coals of the meager fire he'd built and kept low. The Harlot took her share and added the dried meat she kept in her pouch. They ate quietly and quickly.

"I'm sorry," the Shepherd said after he'd kicked some dust on the coals. "About ... discussing your afterlife."

"It's all right," the Harlot said a little brusquely.

"It's not. I'm ..." He sighed. "It's your decision to make or not make."

"It's all right," the Harlot repeated, her voice softening. "It's your line of work. I doubt you could help it."

He nodded absently. "There's something else. Something I should have told you."

"What is it now? The names?"

"Harlot," the Shepherd said. "I have a daughter."

The Harlot stared at him, dumbfounded.

Had the Harlot been only a thief, and the Shepherd just a priest, that sentence would have weighed less than the dust on the air between them and been as easily brushed aside. But the Harlot was the resurrection agent, and the Shepherd, until he spoke those words, another of Viridi's spies, more secret than man.

I have a daughter—those words gave the Shepherd a past, a name, a people. With those words he put himself completely in the Harlot's hands.

“You know the rules.” the Harlot said, as if she could undo it all. “No entanglements.”

“The rules were bent.” the Shepherd said.

“That girl’s life is in danger.”

“Yes.” He paused. “More so. because Viridi knew too.”

“Hrast.”

The Shepherd’s daughter could be the key to unraveling the whole of Viridi’s spy network, if one knew the right questions to ask. She was the key to the Shepherd, who was the key to dozens of agents, including the Harlot and their patrons and contacts. A valuable piece.

His eyes met hers. “You don’t tell me to run once we’re in there, agreed?” he said. “I’m not a coward. Even if Viridi kept me inside the House.”

“No,” she said. “You might be the bravest man I know.”

There were half a dozen entrances to the Night Vault, but down at the base of a cliff near the edge of Ahlarkham Barony, a narrow tunnel led up from the caverns reeking of strange vapors of ash and garlic and rotten eggs. The traces of Reshka’s experiments.

The last time the Harlot had stood here, she had been three days from death. She wondered if she could count herself that lucky this time.

The sun hung low over the vast sulfurous body of Lake Shalanc. Sunset would be in a scant hour, and Selune hung low on the darkening eastern horizon. Even then, the Harlot thought, the darkness of the cave would be unparalleled.

“That’s it?” the Shepherd said, calmly.

“Yes. We’ll have to hurry,” she said. “Keep at least one hand on a wall as you go. It’s slick.”

Neither moved. Beyond the cave mouth, the worst of the Harlot’s nightmares waited. Death. Undeath. Being tortured by Reshka for all of time.

“What’s your daughter’s name?”

A wind whistled out of the cavern, sounding for all the world like the sweet lure of a demon.

“Mira,” the Shepherd said. ““Her mother named her.”

“It’s lovely.” She regarded him for a long moment, and found herself wishing she’d been the Shepherd’s daughter or anyone’s daughter other than the streets of Ankhapur. Wishing someone had cared about her enough to stare down someone like the woman she’d become rather than risk Reshka or Saestra discovering her.

“Inanna,” she said. “My name is Inanna.”

“Inanna.” the Shepherd said, softly. He looked away. “I’m Tarn. It’s nice to finally meet you.” He swallowed. “It’s very nice to have known you.”

“Stop that,” she said, though her eyes welled with tears. “We have a job to do. You grab Viridi. I’ll hold off Reshka.”

“And if I can’t?”

“We’ll have to destroy them both.” she said simply. “And don’t wait for me to get out of your way.”

He nodded, still unable to meet her eye. "All right. I'll do what you ask. But do one thing for me?"

"What?"

"Take this blessing with you." He held the silver disk in both hands, the sapphire eyes of the goddess glinting in the moonlight. "You don't have to ... I mean ..." He ran a thumb over the amulet. "Take her protection, even if you don't want her."

"You won't be able to protect yourself"

He placed his hand on her sternum, flags of silver light dancing around the edges of his palm. "You'll be protecting me."

She met his gaze. What a tragedy, she thought sadly, that we did not know each other all those years.

"Do it."

Selune's blessing raced over her skin, sending waves of shivers through her nerves. Her lungs seemed to freeze for a moment, and all she could see was the shape of the fading light painted across the Shepherd's face.

The top of her head seemed to open like a lily bud and Selune poured in.

Her breath scared her lungs. Suddenly she was young again—a twiggy girl full of hope and desperation in equal turn. She was a woman, grown tall and solid in her own bones. She was aged. She was ageless. She was dead. She was Viridi and Saestra and even the Shepherd.

For a moment, the Harlot was full of everything and everything was silvered.

Everything under the moon, a voice said—dulcet and damning. All things that seek the light in the darkness. Even the shadowed. The shivers became a hum, and the Harlot's heart wept. Sweet as the gods should sound and cold as a demon should.

The feeling was over as quickly as it had claimed her. and she was left feeling calm, but still so aware of the moon and the Shepherd and the rustle of bodies that waited in the cave beyond. Without looking, she felt certain she could count them.

"Come on," she whispered, trying to forget the strange and lovely voice.

The cave had been damaged since the last time the Harlot had traveled down it. Scree littered the path, and a stream of water crisscrossed through it. Columns so wide the Harlot could not put her arms around them had collapsed, their carcasses twisted and broken on the cave floor. She squeezed through a fracture in one that blocked the path, her sunrod casting toothy, vicious shadows.

Behind her, the Shepherd held his chain ready.

At the foot of the slope, the cavern opened into a large chamber, spiked with stalactites and stalagmites, and more of the broken columns. The path widened and led down into the main chambers of the Night Vault, to the quarters of the bandits and the resting place of Saestra Karanok.

But in the opposite direction, a second cave opened into

the domed room, smelling of blood and bitter herbs, strange chemicals and soot. And framed in the doorway under a fluttering lamp, was Viridi's body, resting on a slab.

Reshka stood beside it watching the path they were making their way down.

"I was beginning to think you wouldn't come," she said. "Your friend is less ... willing than Na was. I have to give you credit for that."

"You want your revenge," the Harlot said, stepping out into the cavern. "Let the cleric take Viridi and we'll settle this."

"But I don't want to kill you, Inanna," Reshka said, naming the Harlot with a viciousness that made the Harlot flinch. "I want to make you suffer. And what better way than to make certain your comrades suffer too."

She whistled sharply, and a dozen vampire spawn unfolded from the shadows, their claws the hands of death, their lost souls reflected in their hungry eyes. They did not wait for the spies to prepare themselves and instead charged forward.

But the moonlight ran through the Harlot, cooling her blood, sending each step, each twist of the sword in her hand as far as it needed to go and no farther. She pulled the Shepherd behind her shielding him. Protect the Shepherd. Protect Viridi's secrets one last time.

The Shepherd's chain flashed like a bolt of lightning, striking the spawn who tried to flank her. Her blade found others, pierced each one and sloughed its corpse to the cold ground as she made her way to Reshka. Their claws bit her skin, their blades smacked against her armor, but she was faster, stronger. Her blade turned one away as she dodged a

second, turned into a third. It was as if her limbs were no longer her own.

Still by the time she reached her foe, blood streamed down her face, and her armor had been split on one side. Reshka drew a wand from her belt. "I didn't need them anyway."

"This won't change anything," the Harlot said.

"Wrong—you'll be mine and I will be avenged." Eldritch energy streamed from the tip of the wand, narrowly missing the Harlot's ear. It hit the column behind the Harlot, and shards of rock exploded outward. Reshka bristled.

The Harlot advanced on Reshka, sword up. "You're making this happen," she said. "I didn't want to kill you then, I don't want to now. Give me the body."

Another spell, this one black as tar, sizzled through the air. It caught the edge of the Harlot's armor before shattering against the damaged column. The air of burning leather coated her tongue.

"Na!" Reshka shouted.

Freed from her compulsion, the wight barreled out of the darkness of Reshka's quarters, black eyes seething. The Harlot turned on her double, but too slowly. She slammed backward into the damaged column. Rock rained down on them.

"You will pay for taking my soul!" Na said, her hot breath rank across the Harlot's face. "For leaving me here! I will get it back!"

The Harlot drew her knee up, knocking Na off balance. She unsheathed her sword.

"I took nothing." She swung the blade, her wounded arm still weakened. It caught the wight's own arm and sliced through the desiccated muscles. Na howled. The Harlot turned her sword and stabbed with it, catching Na under the ribs. Her own stomach heaved.

"Reshka killed us," she gasped. "Reshka raised you. Reshka did this! And she can't undo it. She can't take back this soul."

From behind Na, a ball of silver light exploded over them both. The wight thrashed against it, and the Harlot felt the light of Selune briefly race through her blood again. She pulled the sword up into the middle of Na's chest.

Na's scream blew through her like a gale. Every wound on the Harlot's body peeled open with the sound. Her life's blood

pumped out into the dank air and her heart wept again, as she died in her own arms.

"You think you've won?" Reshka said. "Reviving her will take mere days."

The Harlot turned on Reshka. She, too, was bloodied and bruised, seared by the Shepherd's blessed chain. As the Harlot stalked forward from the remains of Na, Reshka's attention shifted to her nemesis.

"You don't touch her," the Harlot said, hearing a shade of Na's anger in her own voice. "You come near her and I'll cut you down the way your mistress should have. Give me Viridi."

Up from the pathway to the Night Vault, the sounds of a score of running feet thudded.

Hrast, the Harlot thought. She glanced at the Shepherd. He shook his head—he didn't want to go through with the contingency. The Harlot, woozy from the blood she was slowly losing, nodded sternly. If he couldn't grab Viridi, he must bury her here.

Bury us both, she knew.

The lights of torches broke the darkness of the cavern and a squad of bandits came into their sight.

"Stay where you are," Reshka hissed. "This one's mine."

"Do as she says," a new voice, mellifluous and dangerous, said. "For now." Reshka froze.

Saestra Karanok stepped out of the gloom as cold and young and lovely as the first time the Harlot had seen her. Her red eyes took in the dead spawn, Na, the Harlot, and Reshka, the shattered column and the Shepherd. The body of Viridi laid out on the slab.

"At what point," Saestra said, "did I say you could go after my allies?"

Reshka squirmed under the gaze of the baroness. "Your agreements with the spymaster are finished."

"They end when I say they end," Saestra said. "It does me no good to act like a common thief—I honor my word to the letter of the agreement."

"If not the spirit," the Harlot said.

Saestra turned to the Harlot. "Which includes you. I believe you were told when you joined us that if you ever left we

would hunt you down and make sure you could never leave again."

"Shepherd." the Harlot called.

"So, for your sake," Saestra said, stepping toward her. "I do hope you've come to stay."

The Shepherd's last spell exploded against the thick curtain of stone that hung across the room. Saestra's cold eyes fell on him, just before the rock began to rain down. The Harlot kept her back to Viridi's bier, her sword out. The bandits rushed away from the entrance and Saestra, deeper into the cavern.

Reshka sprinted after them, but paused at the entrance to the deeper caves to watch as the cave-in covered over her home, her enemies, and her only route of escape. The Harlot met her eyes and found the same dread she felt surging in herself. But none of the silver fire's coolness.

Then the ceiling came down.

The Harlot woke briefly, though how much later it was she didn't know. The cave had finished collapsing. Viridi was buried in the rubble. Below her waist, the Harlot felt nothing, and above it she felt only pain. The warmth of her own blood soaked the rock beneath her.

A hand stroked her forehead. "Shepherd?" she whispered. "Tarn?"

But, no—the hand was cold as ice. Saestra Karanok sat beside her, brushing the hair off her forehead. "Your friend is gone," she said. "And you are dying. I can fix both."

"Don't," the Harlot gasped.

"You're all alone. No one's going to save you this time. Submit to me□"

The Harlot grabbed Saestra's wrist. "Don't!... You ..."

Saestra drew back, one eyebrow arched, like a bow drawn taut. "If that's what you want, agent."

"I want ..." the Harlot's voice failed her. She could feel her blood pumping from the wound in her back. She swallowed against the lump in her throat. "Let him ... run."

"Your compatriot?" Saestra looked past the Harlot, into the darkness.

"Yes... the priest."

The vampire appraised her with a subtle smile. "Why should I do that?"

"Don't... need him."

"He caused this cave-in, damaged my home," Saestra said. "Need isn't the question. It's what I want. Hunger for. Desire." "Stopped... Reshka."

The name caused a flicker of distaste to cross Saestra's flawless face. "There is that. And the spymaster is here, where I can be sure my secrets are safe. And you. I suppose it's not worth my time to convince you to stay. You have your goddess to go to."

The Harlot laughed, and she felt the blood spatter up into her mouth. "Faith ... less."

"You? You are so full of the moon goddess's blessing, your eyes arc glowing." Saestra sighed and smoothed the Harlot's

hair back again. "I have what I want. Rest. I'll sit with you, agent."

The Harlot let herself relax. Her breath softened and her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes again, the world was a formless plain of white mist, moonlight shifting on its surface.

Wandering Stores

Bruce R. Cordell

wandering stores

5 Eleasias. the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Dust kicked up by Jada's boots coated her throat. The mountain pass ahead looked dry as a heap of old bones. The sky's iron hue lent the landscape a hopeless cast.

Jada propped her spear against the pockmarked face of the overhanging cliff and fished for the waterskin in her pack. She removed the cork, and dribbled brackish fluid into her mouth. It was the last of her water. If she didn't find a spring soon, she'd die of thirst in Skclkor's southern range.

It was a race, she thought. Would lack of water kill her first, or the vengeful dragon that hunted her?

She'd die either way.

Unless she could reach Wandering Stones. It was close. If she could trust the journal's directions, Jada was nearly there. Except she had yet to spy even the first landmark□

A shadow swept across the ground. Jada tumbled into a fissure in the cliff face. She scraped her hand and bumped her head so hard stars danced.

Her heart hammered. Had it been a cloud moving across
ihc sun's face?

She turned herself around in the cramped space. She waited another few moments then peeked out.

The sky was cloudless. The only thing that marred its dull silver perfection was the sculling wings of a dragon. A dragon whose silhouette Jada was all too familiar with.

It hadn't seen her. Jada knew it. Otherwise she'd be dead. Blind luck had again proved her savior. Of course, luck was also responsible for her predicament.

She watched the dragon continue its lazy glide. It grew smaller and smaller with distance, then slipped behind a ridge.

Jada inched out of the hole, keeping her eyes on the sky. The empty waterskin she kicked into the opening, but she snatched up her spear. That could still do her some good. Or at least bolster her morale.

The dragon was being methodical. It didn't know exactly where Jada was, only that she traveled in that direction. Time to move while the thing was over the horizon.

It was Shander's fault she was out here. Damn the old coot for dying and leaving her his personal effects.

"Selfish bastard," she grunted, her voice hoarse with exertion as she advanced up a steep incline.

Jada wished she'd followed her first instinct when the brass chest became her property. The battered thing was left behind by Shander Harimdor, her late and increasingly unmourned father. A document bearing her name had been fixed to its dingy surface. The key to the chest had also come into her possession. He'd bequeathed both to her, if nothing else of his property or fortune.

She wished she'd sold the chest to her estranged siblings. They'd made out quite well when Shander's last testament was read. But upon learning their father had left their sister even the battered old trunk, their eyes thinned in jealousy. Two immediately offered gold in return for the man's last remembrance.

She'd been too proud to accept, despite needing the coin.

She kept the chest to spite them rather than out of any lingering fondness for Shander. Though lather in name, the man had rarely given Jada his attention. Always too busy administering to his business in 'Rimmon. The man had been more a myth than a person to her. More so than any of her older siblings, Jada was raised by nannies and servants who tended her for promise of coin, not love.

She found a variety of odds and ends in the chest. Mostly worthless junk. But a tattered journal caught her eye. The title Dragonheir Clans marched across the cover in delicious gold leaf.

Folks enjoyed dwelling on the myth of Dragonheirs in the Swordlands. Many songs and fanciful stories told of the "lost Dragonheir" who would one day rise from obscurity and put various wrongs to right and, of course, go kill a passel of dragons in the process.

As supposed inheritors of the power claimed by ancient Dragonmasters, modern-day Dragonheirs should have the ability to control dragons by gaze, voice, or touch. So went the legend.

No one knew if primordials had actually kept Dragonmasters in their courts in the first place. Why would Dawn Titans bequeath a handful of mortals with ultimate power over their temperamental mounts? It was an open historical question.

Jada read the journal. She discovered her lather had been a fan of Dragonmaster and Dragonheir stories. The journal seemed half storybook and half genealogy, tracing Dragonheir bloodlines as they flowed through the clans of Horndragon, Arkclad, Rclguld, and Marlscripcent.

According to his notes, few of the Arkeld and Rclguld clans yet survived, and none had ever produced anything approaching a Dragonheir. On the other hand, the Horndragon and Marlscrpent lines had been wiped out long before. Except, that wasn't quite true, Shander's journal claimed.

One child of the Marlserpeni line survived the clan's purge.

The child's name was Jada. Jada Marlscrpent. And Shander had taken the child, aged less than a year, from an orphanage in Ulark to raise as his own. Before Ulark, the child had come from the north, from a place called Wandering Stones.

Jada chuckled, thinking back on how the journal's meaning had burst upon her, making her dizzy like a draught of red wine. Her dry throat turned the mirth into a cough.

She hadn't believed it, or at least, hadn't wanted to.

To do so would mean her whole life was a lie. All the small victories she'd achieved and the many defeats instantly rendered trivial because they were part of Shander's facade.

That defiance lasted all of a tenday.

In the end, she'd had no choice but to accept the inked words at face value.

Which meant her life was a fiction. And Jada was tired of living a lie.

She'd promised herself she would have the truth, wherever it led. She would seize the heritage Shander stole from her!

Her unruly ego pushed common sense to the side.

Jada shook her head. How many times had she relived the events leading up to her flight? A hundred times? A thousand? She was spiraling away in continuous rumination that led nowhere but depression.

“Damn regrets. They aren’t worth anything except a sour stomach.” So her last hope, slim as it was, lay in Wandering Stones. There, she hoped, she could finally escape her pursuer and learn more about the one who bore her.

She tried to disperse her dark thoughts, imagining them taking wing like a startled flock of crows. She closed her eyes. She breathed.

When she opened her eyes, she spied a sea green boulder on the ridge. Jada blinked. There, just as Shander’s journal

had described, was one of the three landmarks necessary to locate the secret city of slaves and their descendants who had escaped the servitude of the Empress Dragon in Skelkor. It was Wandering Stones.

Jada laid eyes on Wandering Stones even as the sun lowered to kiss the western horizon. The city sheltered within a narrow valley between two facing slopes. Without the journal’s guidance, finding it by chance would have been all but impossible.

A massive boulder field dwarfed the city’s rock and wood structures. The field stretched up a shallow slope to the summit, and down the other side. Though jumbled and piled in no discernable order near the outlying buildings, the boulders almost seemed to form a mineral maze near the slope’s crown, as if laid down by the hands of a giant long ago.

By comparison, the “city” of escaped slaves was anticlimactic. It was a village. The buildings were mostly one story and small. The architecture employed a circular span of stones roofed with straw thatching. Thin lines of smoke trailed from several chimneys. Otherwise, Jada saw no movement. The aroma of roasted meat and vegetables wafted on the evening air.

When she spied the mountain stream that bisected the city, the promise of supper faded. First, she would drink her fill! She advanced as twilight purpled the sky.

Two people emerged from a building as Jada reached the city outskirts. One was a human woman wearing a flamboyantly dyed other and turquoise robe. She carried a bow with an arrow already nocked. The weapon wasn’t quite pointed at Jada, but close enough to get the point across that Jada should stay on her best behavior.

The other figure was a dragonborn man whose scales were dyed the same color scheme as the archer’s robe. The dragonborn leaned on a staff whose headpiece was a chunk of rough quartz. Small feathers and charms dangled from it. Neither spoke.

Jada cleared her throat and said, “I’ve trudged for days through these damn mountains looking for you. May I enter?”

“Who are you?” the dragonborn said.

“My name is Jada. I seek sanctuary.”

The woman nodded, but didn’t lower her bow.

“You come from the south,” accused the dragonborn, “but you don’t have the look of someone who’s recently escaped the collar. Nor did the stones warn me a slave would find us this day. seeking solace.”

“Your ‘stones’ didn’t lie, because I’m no slave. I come from the Swordlands, where people are free.”

“Then why did you come?”

“A brown dragon hunts mc,” Jada said. She gestured with her spear back along her track.

The dragonborn studied her for several long heartbeats. He said, “Answer me this. If I judge you speak true, you may enter. If I judge otherwise, I’ll raise the city against you.”

Jada nodded. She steeled herself, hoping the strangely dyed creature wasn’t going to ask her some csotetica only a former slave would know.

“Arc you a spy sent by the Empress Dragon or any of her servitors or allies?”

He fixed her with unblinking eyes, as if his gaze might burn through her flesh to regard her soul. Perhaps they could. He had the look of a tribal shaman.

But the question was ridiculous. “Of course not! The furthest thing from it. I’m trying to get away from a dragon! It wants mc dead. Now, are you going to let me in, or shall I just expire from thirst right here?”

The dragonborn looked at the archer. She shrugged. He turned back to Jada and said. “You speak the truth. Mostly. I sense you also hold back something ...”

Jada held her tongue. Her silence promised nothing.

The dragonborn gestured with his staff. "Very well. Enter Wandering Stones. Go have your drink."

She rushed in among the buildings. A few people emerged as she swept past, but she had eyes only for the stream.

Jada threw herself down on its shallow bank, cupped her hands, and dashed them into the water. The liquid shocked her numb to the forearms. She raised the water to her lips and drank. It was sweeter than iced honeyed wine.

When she rose, nearly two dozen people stood nearby, watching her. The open doors of their homes unrolled lanes of firelight through the darkening air. The townsfolk were dressed in serviceable, homespun clothing as brightly luted as the colors of the two grceters.

The dragonborn had followed her to the stream's edge. He bowed and said. "I am the stonetalker of Wandering Stones. I am called Olothon. Welcome." He looked at her expectantly.

"My name is Jada. Thank you for letting me in."

She jumped when the gathering townsfolk began to keen. A moment before trying to stab the nearest one with her spear, she realized they were singing.

It was a song of welcome.

The melody was only a few stanzas long and spoke of heavy weights lifted and spirits unleashed. If Jada were a recently escaped slave, she supposed the song would have moved her. When the performance finally ended, she bowed.

Several of the townsfolk glanced at the boulder field. They seemed apprehensive. In ones and twos, they dispersed back to their homes, closing their doors tight.

Jada looked up to the darkening slope too, looking for whatever it was that had spooked the villagers. Perhaps a predator hunted among the great stones by night. “Would you like a meal?”

She turned. The woman with the bow stood only a few paces away, this time sans arrow, Jada nodded.

“Then come with us to the guard house. Olothon and I were just sitting down to table.” “Thank you ...” “I’m Faryn.”

“Thanks, Faryn. I’d like that.”

“We’d like to hear what you did to earn a dragon’s vengeance.”

☐ M

Jada sipped at another spoonful of stew. Its savory warmth rushed down her throat and heated her core.

Olothon and Faryn sat with her at a small but high table next to a long horizontal slit in the guard house wall. The opening offered a view along the very approach she’d used. The boulder field was also visible. A proficient archer could take shots through the opening with little chance of reprisal.

Faryn began, “So☐”

“Why,” interrupted Jada, “is everyone so afraid of the rocks? Does something dangerous live out there?”

Olothon chuckled. He said, “No, nothing lives there. Unless it be the stones themselves. Each night they move around. Before morning, they rearrange themselves into a wholly new design. Folks are concerned that a moving stone might run them over.”

Faryn said, “That, and the ghosts.”

“What? Undead?” said Jada.

“No, no, orat least nothing dangerous.” Olothon said, waving his hands in a placatory manner. “Phantasms and spectral images. They wander the rocky, open-sky corridors between the boulders.

Most of the townsfolk don’t understand the value the spirits bring. Every time the stones roam, they create new lanes, new configurations. That’s when the ghosts are thickest.”

“Are the ‘ghosts’ of people you knew ... before they died?”

Faryn looked down. “Sometimes. But most are drawn from far lands. As if something about the moving tocks calls uneasy spit its the world over. We like to say that, amid the shifting boulders, unhappy souls finally discover a path that grants them rest.”

Jada nodded, though she didn’t really understand. She said, “I have learned ... my mother came from Wandering Stones, where dragons never come. But she died, and I, only a baby ... I was brought to the south. I grew up in the Swordlands.”

“What was your mother’s name?”

“She was called Elisal. Elisal Barnath. But her birth name was Elisal Marlserpent.”

Faryn shook her head and said, "I have been in Wandering Stones nearly ten years. But I don't know that name."

The dragonborn's eyes widened with surprise and perhaps disbelief. He said, "I recall Elisal. She found her way here two dozen years ago, barely alive and heavy with child."

"Barely alive?" said Jada. She already knew her mother was dead, but her throat tightened nonetheless.

Olothon nodded. "Elisal was a slave. She was sorely wounded during her escape. She did not live more than a few days after she gave birth. Elisal didn't want her child growing up in the shadow of Skclkor. She arranged to have the child sent south. She said the girl was the last of the Marlserpent line."

Faryn gasped. She said, "The Marlserpent line?"

The dragonborn interrupted, "A line through which the blood of Dragonheirs runs. You claim that girl was you?" He pointed at Jada with the end of his staff.

Jada raised her chin. "I do."

He sat back. "How extraordinary!"

"I hoped Wandering Scones contained many Dragonheirs, dcspice Shander's claim I was the last," Jada said. "Ic would explain how escaped slaves can congregace here, in the shadow of their former bondage ..."

Olothon shook his head no. "I'm sorry. There are no Dragonheirs here, unless you arc one. It is the stones that seem to keep wyrms away."

"Then there is no one I can talk to about my mother?"

“No one alive□” began Olothon.

Faryn interposed, “What did you do to earn the ire of a dragon?”

“I only recently learned everything in my life was built on a falsehood. The idea maddened me. I needed to see if the words in my adoptive father’s journal, about my lineage, were true. So ... I tried to drive down a wyrm.”

Olothon drew in his breath. Faryn leaned forward, her eyes wide. “Could you?”

“No. But I managed to incite one to murderous fury by proclaiming myself a Dragonheir to its face.”

When Jada indicated sudden weariness, her hosts offered one of the cots shoved against the far wall. Jada accepted.

She kicked off her boots then rolled onto the cot’s taut fabric. Its faint musty smell reminded her of a hammock she used to swing in as a child.

Sleep claimed her.

Slumber gave way to dreams. At first the images were light and nostalgic, recalling some of the few happy events of her youth as a privileged, if ignored, child of a well-to-do merchant. She had her favorite tree, her pet zhairtail. and a servant who never failed to bring her sugared confections.

Color leached from her unconscious reveries when Shander appeared in the dream.

Jada had always sought her father’s attention, first by trying to be the model daughter. When that didn’t work, by rebelling in any way she could.

When she was old enough, she'd joined the Ulark militia, becoming a spear fighter. She'd earned a few scars and chronic aches, but also a deadly skill and the respect of her peers. But never the regard of her family.

So she moved out of the house and severed nearly all her contacts.

Even that didn't provoke Shander to acknowledge her. Not that she cared so much as time wore on. She finally found a life of her own, one that didn't depend upon the notice of her father.

The chest and the journal it contained hurtled into her life like a runaway cart, effortlessly overturning her notion of her place in the world, revealing it as a pretense.

With journal in hand and a wounded ego blinding her to reason, she'd traveled north to the nation of Eskorn. She'd show Shander. She'd show everyone! She looked for dragons.

She chased rumors of sightings near Firctrees, a tumbled ruin. The rumors proved accurate. Dragons were digging for something beneath the stones. One night, she saw a vast, winged silhouette. Without giving herself time to reconsider, she burst into the presence of a dragon.

Their gazes locked. Looking into the thing's eyes made her knees weak.

The dragon's voice was the sound of a river overflowing its banks in flood. "Human, why are you here?"

Jada retained eye contact. A warmth woke in her chest. It was a feeling new to her. It was equal parts fear, excitement, and ... recognition?

"I am Jada. Who are you?"

The dragon's head curled down to her level. "I am Thovantarcth, Finder of Lost Hoards. Why do you not flee? Don't you know I'm going to eat you?"

The odd licit in her chesi expanded, filling her belly and throat.

"Are you?" Her voice quavered with unexpected fear. "Maybe not. For you stand in the presence of a Dragonhcir, Thovantarcth! And I command you—on your belly, wyrm!"

Jada's eyes snapped open. Firelight played on the guard house ceiling. Thunder rumbled through the walls so loud the cot trembled in harmony. The sound rolled on and on, ebbing and surging like the surf.

She rolled to her side and looked around.

Faryn and her bow were nowhere to be seen. Olothon stood at the window, studying the night. A mighty storm played beyond the opening, reflecting erratic flashes off the dragonborn's dyed scales. The smell of rain was sharp in the air.

She pulled on her boots and joined him. Frenetic lightning illuminated the belly of green and copper hued clouds that boiled out of the stcclsky. A spray of moisture misted through the aperture.

"Some storm," she said.

Olothon nodded. He said, "The stones wander tonight. Look." "Oh!"

From one breath to the next, boulders roamed. The tempest provided only snapshots—she didn't actually see the stones shift. But each time a jagged burst of lightning highlighted the slope, the great stones claimed new positions. Jumbled one upon the next, or strewn out in a curling line, or balanced precariously; with every subsequent flash, the tableau shifted again.

"I..." said Jada.

"At a loss for words? It is truly amazing," said Olothon. "I've lived here fifty years. Each time I see them move, I am humbled and awed."

"I almost don't believe my own eyes! It's like a dream. What causes it?"

"We've never learned."

Jada stared at the dance, enrapt. Then said. "You implied before the stones talked to you, told you things. You never asked the stones to explain themselves?"

Olothon shrugged. He said, "In truth, I do not speak with the boulders, even though the villagefolk call me a stonctalkcr. No, I confer with the spirits drawn to Wandering Stones in the wake of each new rearrangement."

"That seems like cheating."

The dragonborn laughed. He said, "Perhaps. But spirits sometimes speak, and rocks ... not very often. Moreover, spirits know many things, though often enough, about events long past."

"Do you think ... they might know anything about Dragonheirs?"

Olothon paused then said, "I was considering that same question. When the storm dies and the stones cease their rambling, come with me into the field. This is a particularly fierce tempest. The paths should be thick with phantasms."

Jada nodded. Goose pimples prickled her skin. The idea of walking with ghosts unnerved her.

They watched the incredible scene unfold.

The warmth of her dream tingled against her sternum. It was the oddest sensation. The feeling was a mix of two opposing emotions, hard to pin down. It was half like childhood memories of lying close to the fire dreaming of winter festival's approach, and half like anticipating thrusting a spear into a foe's gut.

The dragonborn cocked his head. "Did you hear that?"

"I hear only thunder."

"I thought"

The guard house shuddered. A portion of the roof collapsed, sending tufts of loose straw everywhere. Olothon yelled. Jada leaped for her spear.

The door opened. Faryn stood in the entrance. Her bow was charred and trailed a line of smoke. Her hair was sodden with rain and something darker. Blood? The woman's eyes were wide.

The archer yelled. "A dragon! A dragon has come to Wandering Stones!" Her voice was a strident blend of terror and disbelief.

“Impossible!” said Olothon. “The stones should prevent...”
The stonetalker trailed off, confusion smearing away his certainty.

The warmth in Jada’s chest expanded. She whispered,
“Thovantarcth?”

Had the dragon ignored the taboo of Wandering Stones...
whatever that was?

A scaled hand the size of a horse dropped from above. Faryn tried to dive away, but the hand snatched her. The archer’s body was jerked upward. Gone.

Olothon made a strangled noise. His breathing became labored.

Jada pointed to the window and whispered, “This way!”

The dragonborn seemed confused, but turned back to the opening. She darted past the slower-moving stonetalker and slipped through. The rain slapped her, instantly cooling her skin. But the troubling heat in her chest remained. The dragon was close!

Olothon tumbled out of the opening, staff in hand. A crash of thunder covered the sound of his exit. Then he was on his feet and running up the slope. Straight toward the shifting, stormlit playground of boulders.

Jada followed, cursing.

1 In sound of splintering timbers and cracking stone came from behind. She craned her head around.

A gargantuan dragon squatted on the ruin of the guard house.

It was Thovantareth, all right. The dragon had the same mass of thick, short horns protruding from its head, giving it its distinctive earth-gouging silhouette. Its wings were two membranous frills that flowed down its body.

The dragon roared, unleashing a haze of burning sand skyward, as if to challenge the crashing storm itself. Jada saw no sign of Faryn.

The warmth in her chest flared. Part of her wanted to turn back and confront the creature.

She recalled how the strange feeling betrayed her last time. How the dragon's blind fury at her impudence provided the cover she required to escape her folly and lose herself in the night.

Thovantareth hadn't forgiven her presumption. It hunted her. Again and again, the dragon proved capable of finding her, even after her trail should have grown long cold.

Her trickle of Dragonheir blood was just enough for the dragon to mark and follow. The city of escaped slaves, where dragons could not go, had been her destination, her hoped-for sanctuary.

That illusion was shattered.

She sprinted after the stonctalker. The sand seemed to pull at her boots with every step.

A (lash of light revealed a clear path between two massive boulders. She saw Olothon pass between them even as darkness returned. She ran blindly, hoping the gap would remain from one lightning strike to the next.

A blue-white blaze smote the heavens. Jada found herself racing down a corridor whose walls were tumbling stones. The sound of grinding rock was one with the thunder. She might have been screaming too. If so, the sound was swallowed by the cacophony.

Another heartbeat of darkness engulfed her. A stronger torrent of rain slapped across Jada, so thick she wondered if she'd completely lost her bearings and, instead of running, had actually fallen into a flooded ravine.

When the next stroke illuminated her surroundings, she saw a tower of boulders, one set upon the next, like a child's blocks. The tower was so high it threatened to graze the boiling clouds.

She veered away from the leaning formation. Before the Dickering lightning faded, she saw her erratic course would slam her headfirst into a boulder that hadn't been there a moment earlier.

She skidded, tripped, and fell headfirst into a blink of shadow. Nothing was there, but she landed hard on the ground anyhow. Her training kicked in, and she managed to hold onto her spear and not skewer herself.

Pain knifed through her left knee.

"Skarn!" she said, scrambling to her feet through the pain.

Light blossomed to her left. It wasn't lightning; it didn't illuminate much of anything. And it wasn't in the sky....

It was Olot lion's staff. Jada dashed for it.

She ran through booming, rain-swept blackness. She couldn't see anything but the mote of illumination hanging ahead. The dense sand lurched beneath her boots as if under the assault of a mad Dawn Titan. She imagined boulders bouncing all around her, moments from smashing her to jelly.

Another rap of lightning showed her imagination wasn't far off. Rocks of every size formed spiraling lines that seemed to converge on her. Through one of the gaps between them, she saw the dragonborn stonetalker, kneeling near the summit of the slope. His staff was planted in the earth, and he leaned on it as if for physical support and spiritual balm.

She ran through the nightmarish boulder panoramas that threatened to roll, topple, or drop on her.

None did.

Olothon started when she reached him. His eyes were chatoyant in his staff light, and for a moment, they reminded her of Thovantareth's gaze in Firctrcs.

"Stay close! And don't stare into the boulderscape!" the dragonborn yelled through the tumult.

As if she'd be stupid enough to leave the summit, having nearly died to gain it! But she wasn't going to close her eyes. If a bouncing rock was out there with her name on it, she wanted to see it before it crushed the life from her.

Shrieking wind and rain, boiling steel sky, and horribly animate boulders raged into the night. For how long. Jada couldn't say. A few hours? Probably. Somewhere during that span, her fear of being smashed numbed to a hollow ache. Whatever was moving the boulders, whether the rocks

themselves or the ghosts Olothon had described, they seemed uninterested in smashing her and the stonctalker flat.

“We survived,” said Olothon. His voice broke Jada from a waking daze.

Pale illumination shimmered down the slope toward the edge of the village. The town itself remained dark, but the boulder held glowed like a congregation of fireflies.

“Do you see?” said Olothon.

The stonetalker had regained his feet. He wasn’t looking down the slope toward the village, but over the summit’s rise and down the other side.

Jada took a few steps and regarded the adjoining valley.

Thousands of stones laid out a maze, or maybe some sort of arena crafted by a mad builder. Every stone gleamed with silvery light.

Figures walked the twisting, convoluted lanes the boulders made.

There were hundreds, walking in utter silence, leaving fading

trails of phantom light in their wakes. A shiver prickled down Jada’s spine.

“The ghosts of Wandering Stones have returned,” said Olothon. “Shall we introduce ourselves?” “Oh. I...”

Jada glanced back at the town. Thovantarcth was nowhere to be seen. Had the dragon dared the stones and paid the

ultimate price? She doubted she was so lucky.

"I guess I'd rather face spirits than a spiteful dragon," she said.

They topped the rise and descended into the maze of stones.

Residual thunder and the occasional dim (lash of lighting hinted the storm was resting, but might return. Jada stopped in her tracks when a spirit appeared around a stony bend only a few paces away.

The spirit was a woman, with skin, hair, and clothes composed of wavering moonlight. She was dressed in heavy robes, and her eyes were empty holes.

Olothon raised his staff. Its headpiece gleamed with the same light. "Hold a moment, if you please? We'd like to talk with you, madam."

The spirit paused and fixed Olothon with a hollow stare. Jada couldn't restrain a shudder.

"I don't have time. I am late," said the spirit.

"Only a moment, madam. Tell me, do you know where you are?"

"Watcrdecp, of course ... though I have lost my way. I am looking for Mountainside. My mansion is built there. Do you know it?"

The dragonborn shook his head. "I don't. I'm sorry, madam. I leave you to it, then."

The spirit nodded then swept by, oblivious to Jada.

“The ghost thinks it’s in ... someplace called Waterdcep?” Jada asked.

“Many walking these paths don’t know they’re dead. If we can find one who realizes its true state, we might learn something. The closer we get to the center, the older the spirits, and the more self-aware. A few of these might know something of Dragonheirs.”

“Arc the ‘self-aware’ ones dangerous?”

“Only sometimes.”

They walked on. They passed a man and a woman who held hands, though neither had faces. Jada saw a child with no arms running down a side lane as if chasing a ball.

A cry of delight rang off the midnight lane, heralding the appearance of a young man on a charger. He raced toward them between two walls of piled boulders. Jada leaped away, but not quickly enough. When the lance pierced her shoulder, she cried out and clapped her hand to the wound.

When she brought her hand away, there was no blood. The pain faded to a tickle.

“The ones who don’t know they are spirits can’t hurt us,” said Olothon. “They can’t even sense us unless I light my staff.”

“No? That one seemed to know what he was doing!”

“Did it harm you?”

Jada just scowled. He knew she wasn’t hurt. But these phantoms had her on edge in a way she couldn’t seem to

get on top of. It just wasn't right she walked so blithely amidst the restless dead.

They continued inward through the warren of piled stone.

"There!" Olothon gestured with his staff to an open area. A series of head-size rocks formed a wide circle on the ground. Dozens of spirits moved through the open space, crossing the area as if it were nothing more than a busy town square. The ghostly figures seemed oblivious to their surroundings or one another. Most were silent; though one strummed a lyre. Jada couldn't hear the notes.

One figure, wrapped in layers of dull gray light, did not move with the rest. A hood concealed its head. It stood within the central circle, watching the flow of spirits.

"That's Carnclian!" said Olothon "It ... he knows much. I thought he'd found his peace." Jada followed the dragonborn into the open area. Phantoms streamed around her like a desolate winter breeze.

The stonetalker blew on the quartz headpiece of his staff, which caused its light to wax.

The cloaked spirit turned its gaze on them. The area beneath its hood was a vacant hollow.

"Do you remember me? I am Olothon."

A whispery voice said, "I ... remember."

The dragonborn bowed. He said, "It's been over a year, Carnclian. I thought you had finally shuffled oft."

Carnclian said, "Time is meaningless."

“What brings you back to Wandering Stones?”

“Sometimes the lanes wind around and lead nowhere. Other times a path is a portal to other places and other times. I have traveled far leagues.”

Olothon leaned forward, his nostrils flaring with fascination.
“What?”

Jada put her hand on the stonetalker’s shoulder, interrupting his next question. She said “Carnelian. What can you tell us of Dragonheirs?”

Thunder rumbled across the valley.

Carnelian turned his empty hood to Jada. The spirit said,
“The descendants of the Dawn Titans’ roost masters?
Extinct. They were hunted to death by a hatred eons old.”

“Not quite true because... I am of the line of Dragonheirs,” Jada said. “My mother was Elisal Marlserpent, who escaped the bondage of Skelkor.”

The hood didn’t shift its regard.

“Did you hear me? I’m a Marlserpcni! But I can’t call my heritage. A dragon hounded me all the way to Wandering Stones, and I can’t stop it.”

“You are Jada Marlserpent?” said the spirit.

“Yes! You know me?”

“I heard the voice in the stones call to your mother Elisal. It guided her to this sanctuary. The voice greeted you at your birth.”

Olothon said. “The voice in the stones? What do you mean?”

“The spirit of spirits that haunts this place. It died long ago, but its soul remains. Echoes of its former strength drive the stones. Its presence is a spiritual lodestone, and mortal souls flock to it each night like iron filings.”

“Olothon!” said a new voice.

Jada and the dragonborn turned to find Faryn. The archer stood at the edge of the stonetalker's staff light. She glimmered like a sheet flapping on the line at twilight. Her color was gone, as was her substance.

“No,” protested the stonetalker.

“Olothon,” Faryn said. “Ware the dragon. It disregards the anger of the stones!”

“Faryn,” Jada said, her voice breaking, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for you to die.”

The archer looked at Jada, “Die? No. I escaped the dragon’s claw ...”

Warmth surged in Jada’s chest. The ground shook. A circular patch of earth bulged upward then burst. Sand and stones erupted from the cavity, followed by the long, undulating length of Thovantarcth.

The brown dragon punched free of the soil. For an instant, it seemed to hang above them savoring the apex of its leap.

Then the scaled hulk pounded down, spraying sand in all directions. Flying grit blinded Jada.

She ran. Something smashed across her shoulder blades. She

tripped over the haft of her spear and went down hard. Sane scraped her face.

She staggered to her feet, scrubbing at her eyes with the hce! of her left palm. The warmth in her chest was like a bonfire.

Jada blinked away the last of the grit.

Thovantareth was curled in a crater of its own making, lad.i stood .11 us edge. I umincsceni spirits swirled around the depression like water around a vortex. The dragon's coppery scales sparkled in the massed ghostlight.

Jada spied Olothon crawling up the opposite slope of the cavity.

"Dragonheir!" said Thovantareth. "Your blood led mc past the wards that defend Wandering Stones. I hoped you would be stupid enough to lead mcall the way here. You did not disappoint! Empress Gauwervvndh.il shall grant me a hoard beyond all imagining when I stamp out every last collar breaker."

"I led you into Wandering Stones?"

"Your blood called to me, Dragonheir. Why do you think you could never quite shake me? Better yet, its draw proved more potent than the ancient enchantments that tried to fence me out. If not for you, this place would still be sacrosanct." The dragon laughed.

Jada wanted to curl up and hide rather than face the creature and its burden of cruel truth. But the feeling in her chest urged her to fight.

“If I am a Dragonheir, then I order you: leave here and never return!”

The creature Hunched. It paused, as if waiting for something that failed to appear. Then its head moved forward again on its neck to regard her. A horrible sound like sandpaper rasping on stone emerged from the dragon. Thovantareth was laughing.

It said, “Yes, you are a Dragonheir. For another few heartbeats.

Bui you failed to harness your talent. Don’t feel bad. No Dragonheir has managed that in living memory. The art that goes with the heritage was lost long before you were conceived!”

Jada concentrated on the warmth suffusing her center, letting the heat render the dragon’s message into so much noise. She imagined it Riling up her throat. It was like a fire, or perhaps a dragon’s inner flame. She coaxed it until it tingled on her tongue like Harimmon spice.

She said, “Wyrn! Heed me! Leave here and never return!” Her voice cracked with an authority that surprised even herself.

Thovantareth shuddered. The dragon clenched its eyes tight. Its massive wing frills flashed out like a cobra’s hood.

Jada said, “I call on the power of the Dragon masters! Heed my instruction! You must obey. Obey me!” Her voice rang across the valley. The circling spirits slowed their circuit as if caught in the power of her command.

The brown dragon shook its head back and forth and pumped its wings. It reared, sending loose rocks flying in

every direction.

Then it stilled. Its breathing slowed. Thovantareth opened its eyes and said, “No. I don’t think so.”

The warmth failed Jada.

The creature’s claw snapped out so quickly she didn’t have time to jump back. It grabbed her.

Air whooshed from her lungs. Even if her power had proved more than a trifle, the dragon’s squeezing grip would have prevented her from using it.

Thovantareth said, “You shall be my witness as I cleanse the city of slaves. Hang on, little Dragonhcir.”

The wrym leaped upward, its wings pulling it□

A blast of lightning clawed out of the steelsky and lanced Thovantareth.

Before Jada quite realized she was falling, the ground met her. Her forehead bounced off the dense sand. Everything turned a nauseous shade of gray with black spots.

A scream shredded the night. A dragon’s scream. The sound’s raw pain pulled Jada up on her side.

Thovantareth had landed, not far from where Jada had fallen. Blood dripped and smoke lifted from an angry gash in the dragon’s side. Its mouth lolled open and it panted like a dog.

The silvery, iron glow sheeting the boulder field flickered. Then it shifted. The illumination lifted up and away from the boulders, pooling in the sky to form a vast figure, tall as a mountain. It was haloed by thunderheads and its legs

straddled the valley. Its vague, humanoid body gleamed with silvery light that looked like nothing so much as the steelsky.

Thovantareth shrieked again then dived into the earth like a ferret going to ground.

The ghostly titan stooped. Its hands pierced the rock as if water. When it straightened, it held the brown dragon in one hand as easily as Jada might have held a spitting kitten.

Thunder rumbled, so loud she clapped her hands to her ears. In that calamitous sound, Jada discerned words, even though she'd never before heard the language.

The mountain-sized spirit said, "Betrayer!" and shook the dragon hard.

Jada couldn't help but cry out in wonder when the silvery manifestation wound up and threw the brown dragon across the heavens. Thovantareth's form whistled over the horizon.

The massive figure allowed its gaze to fall until it seemed to catch light. All the strength in her limbs ran out of her like water.

The figure disintegrated into so many shards of fading light. Ghostly sparks rained down across the boulder field, until the stones glistened once more like light on water.

Jada pulled herself to a sitting position. Her body felt like a bag of bruises.

"What just happened?" she asked the night.

The stonetalker staggered to his feet, halfway around the crater. He limped over to Jada and held out a hand. With the

dragonborn's help, she stood.

"What was that thing?" she said. "Why was it the color of the steelsky?"

"I think ... it was a physical manifestation of what keeps Wandering Stones free of dragons."

A whispery voice said, "You are correct, Olothon, but you do not go far enough."

"Carnclian," said the dragonborn. The phantom was back.

"What was it, really?" said Jada.

The spirit said, "It was the ghost of a primordial; a Dawn Titan. It was Arambar."

"Arambar?" said Olothon, his voice incredulous. "But I thought"

"Arambar's residual power paints the sky its iron hue. But here in Wandering Stones, that residue is stronger. This is where Arambar died, struck down by his own steed, a dragon. This is where the primordial's spirit rests uneasy."

"Which is why dragons fear to come here," said Jada.

Carnclian said, "No dragon has ever dared the wards before. The roaming stones have always sufficed to warn off those unable to remember their own history. The power of your blood made this one too bold. It must have sensed your potential."

Jada flushed. "I have potential?"

Carnclian said, "If you learn to harness your power, one day you might claim the power of a Dragonmaster. On that day,

the dragons of Abeir will tremble.”

Jada shook her head. “I won’t make the mistake of challenging a dragon again.”

“The choice may not be yours,” said the hooded spirit.
“You’ve declared yourself.”

“The good news never stops,” she said.

They all stood awhile in silence, watching the phantoms renew their silent routes through the rock lanes.

Finally Jada said, “Why does Arambar’s ghost rearrange the stones every night? Is it meant as a warning to dragons to stay clear?”

“No. The ward keeping wyrms away is a consequence of the Dawn Titan’s presence; of Arambar’s special hate for the steeds that betrayed it. Dragons would avoid this area regardless.”

“Then why?”

“Each new boulder field is a countet. An event of great magnitude approaches. Arambar creates a unique design each night to count down to it.”

Jada said, “What’s so important a ghost primordial spends the ages counting the days to its arrival?”

The phantom said, “That, I would give much to learn.”

The Bone Bird

Jaleigh Johnson

lendris, near b^ldur's gate

2 Mirtul, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Did you finish the task I gave you?" Relwin dredged up a teacher's tone. Even dying, he could wear the mantle.

"Lei's not talk about thai yet. Can you take food?" The saddlebags were still on the horses. Bromar started to turn, but the old man had strength left. He squeezed his student's hand, nails digging into palm flesh untiil he'd made a burning ember.

"You will listen," the old man snarled. He sucked in air, pulling it from blood. "You must ... face this. This death is part of Chauntca's burden. We accept the bloom with the decay. One serves ihe other." He gritted his lecth. His gums were raw and pink. "Beneath the Black Elm," his mentor said, "you can dig my grave. Give my body back to the land, and then go on to the village. Lendris needs you."

"I won't leave you here," Bromar said.

"I will be far from here," Relwin said, "far from pain. But the villagers ... they are Chauntca's children too." He pressed the back of Bromar's hand to the holy symbol hanging from

his neck. The metal was hot from fevered skin and a staggering heart. "Your responsibility."

The old man closed his eyes, but his hand was still a hot ember in Bromar's bear claw grip.

Relwin labored through a hundred more breaths. Bromar counted how each came slower than the last. When the final breath slid out of Relwin's mouth. Bromar forced himself to watch the moment of death. Fire rolled over in his belly, but he endured it when the old man's body went limp, relinquishing the soul that had been drowning in illness for far too long.

When he was holding only the shell, the last little burning ember of Relwin in his palm, Bromar let go.

He found a shovel tied across the old man's saddle, along with a pair of heavy gloves sized to fit his huge hands.

The soil under the Black Elm was loose but thorny with roots. His shovel chipped white sores into the buried branches. Cold wind whipped through the trees. Firelight jumped and waned, but Bromar kept digging.

Dawn came slowly, piercing gray holes and mist through the forest canopy. Birds shrieked hollow waking cries in the tangled branches above his head. His mentor's body lay in a cocoon of dying firelight. When it was bright enough, Bromar stamped the fire out and covered Relwin's face with the blanket.

The sun came up and Bromar's muscles were tight clamps around his bones. His shovel was clogged with dirt, and he was only up to his knees in the grave. To keep an animal from tearing into the body, he would need more depth, to his shoulders at least.

Bromar drank from his waterskin and laid the bladder next to the hole. He didn't stop to eat. He wouldn't keep any food down while he was in the hole.

Highsun passed. A mound had begun to form outside the grave. Tiny dirt rivers slid down the mass and hit Bromar in the eyes. Muscles strained under his tabard. The thick gloves made

his hands into liquid balls of lire. He stripped them off and dug barehanded until he'd reamed the skin from his palms.

Finally, it was done. Bromar didn't count the handspans down to be sure. He knew by the muffled forest sounds, the dimness inside the grave, and the deep earth smell. A decaying vault removed from the world. With the edge of the shovel he flattened the bottom of the hole so that his mentor would lie comfortably.

Arms quivering with weakness, Bromar hauled himself out of the grave. He spread out another blanket and shrouded Rclwin's body completely in wool. Lifting the swaddled form, he went to his knees beside the grave and lowered his mentor into the ground.

He took up the shovel and buried it in the waiting mound of dirt. As he threw the first bit of earth onto the wool blankets, Bromar began to pray aloud.

"Chauntca's light, come from within your servant," he said. "Let this body nourish the earth and bring forth the next life..."

Fie plunged the shovel into the mound again. Dirt fell like rain.

"Leave this flesh and take his spirit into your arms ..." The shovel went into the mound a third time. "This body is the vessel..."

Bromar's voice cracked. His strength gave out, and he dropped the shovel on the ground. He stumbled away from the hole, from the smell of fresh earth and the sound of worms burrowing in the dirt. He swore he could hear them.

Collapsing before the spent fire. Bromar breathed in and out. The forest blurred around him. He recognized this, the exhaustion, but he was powerless to fight it. Three days on the road watching over Relwin without sleep. He'd had no food today. But it had been the grave, the digging that look him at last.

Bromar's eyes drifted closed, and he slept a newborn's sleep.

When he awoke, Bromar was lying on his back, eyes filled with the dark sky and the tree canopy blotting out the stars. At first he didn't remember where he was. He lay still in the dark and it all came rushing back.

Guilt swamped Bromar. He hadn't completed the prayer. He'd left his mentor in a gaping, unconscratcd hole.

He scrambled to a sitting position, ignoring the screams from his sore muscles. He groped blindly in the dark for his shovel, and his hand fell on a soft patch of wool.

Bromar's breath caught. He fumbled in his pouch for one of the sunrods he kept hidden and struck it against his gauntlet.

Gold radiance filled the clearing. By the light, Bromar saw his shovel lying where he'd dropped it next to Relwin's grave.

Relwin's body lay outside his grave, still swaddled in the wool blankets. His face was obscured, but his head was

turned slightly toward Bromar. Bromar could see the ridge of a nose imprinted through the blanket, the impression of eyes staring at him.

The village of Lendris lay at the end of a winding dirt track off the main trade road from Baldur's Gate. Bromar guided the horses to the end of the road, where a half-circle of buildings squatted in the dying sunlight. A handful of lanterns were already lit in the dooryards of houses. The light chased shadows back to the tree line. Behind the houses, tall fences marked the boundary between forest and farm. The Cloak Wood and its thick brush had encroached over many of these.

Through tunnel-like vision, Bromar saw the inn at the far end of the village, its peaked roof rising higher than any other building nearby. Light shone from the windows. Bromar sighed in relief and nudged the horses in that direction. When the lights got close enough to swallow him, he pulled back on the reins.

A sign above the door read "The Bone Bird." The paint was new. Black trace lines shone through the bright ivory letters. Bromar tied the horses outside and pulled open the door. He had to stoop to get through the entryway.

Cramped warmth and air redolent of simmering vegetables—those were his first impressions of the small common room. A woman was speaking loudly from one of the long communal tables stretching away toward the back wall.

"Everything you thought you knew doesn't matter for spit out here."

Fist pounding accompanied this pronouncement. There were eight men and women gathered in the center of the common

room, some straddling chairs and others tucked up on the floor like children around the woman's legs. They didn't pay any attention to Bromar's entrance.

A bar made of Black Elm wood sat off to the left of the door. Behind it stood a black-bearded man with a rag and fist buried in a tankard.

Bromar went to the bar. He could smell the grave dirt in his own sweat.

"Do you have a room to spare?" he asked the man with the rag. His voice, unused for a day alone on the road, sounded raspy and strained. "Food?"

"Soup's on the fire," the man said, looking him over. "You can ladle it up yourself. I have rooms. You have a horse?"

"Two," Bromar said. "They're tied up outside."

"Rait, Toran, get out here," the man said. Two boys—the eldest looked fifteen, the younger half that age—appeared from a back room wearing filthy aprons. "I'm Amon," the man said. "I own the place. If you need anything, me or my boys can help you. See to the man's horses," he told the boys.

"My thanks," Bromar said. "My name is Bromar. I've come from Baldur's Gate. Your village sent a request for aid."

The innkeeper snorted. "A tenday ago, we sent the missive."

He pulled his hand out of the tankard. Black and gray hairs ran up his forearms. He had a pink, sluglike blister on the back of his left hand from knuckle to wrist. His right hand was missing two fingers.

"I'm sorry," Bromar said. "My mentor's health prevented him starting the journey sooner. Unfortunately, Relwin's condition worsened, and he died on the road to the village."

I put him in the ground myself, Bromar thought. Twice. Coldness spread through his chest at the memory of the body, staring at him in the dark.

The innkeeper nodded. "I'm sorry for the loss of your man. Not to worry, though, when the girl got here, she calmed everyone right down."

"Girl?"

"What you coax from the ground out here, in the teeth of the Cloak Wood, it's a sacred feast," the woman told her audience. Fists pounded on tables.

Bromar turned to look. The woman paused in her speech to take a drink from her soup bowl. She met Bromar's eyes over the rim and winked.

"She got here a bit before you did," the innkeeper said, "told us she'd gotten word of our plight and wanted to help."

Bromar gazed across the room at the woman. She sat sideways on her chair, one leg flung over the other, her soup and a cup of ale at her elbow. A stout woman, she was as wide as Bromar in the chest and shoulders. She had a thick, mannish chin and brown hair knotted at the back of her head. Her eyes were dark like the Black Elm's branches.

She'd left her tunic unlaced at the top, exposing a rose on a gold holy symbol nestled gaudily between her breasts.

The rose sprang from a field of healthy grain—stained at the edges by grave dirt. Relwin's holy symbol.

Bromar picked up the tankard the innkeeper had been cleaning. He heard, from a distance, "I can fill that up for you, friend ..." but the innkeeper's voice was nothing more than a buzz in his ears. He was out of his body, a spectator.

He curled his fingers around the tankard handle and strode to the woman's table. Her companions looked up when he approached. They saw Bromar's face. Chairs scraped across the floor, legs and arms and drinks disappeared from his path. They recognized Bromar's expression, the emotion buried in his tight cheeks and eyes gone to slits.

"Hello, friend," the woman said without looking up from her meal. She didn't see the danger. "You're welcome to join us if you don't mind the company of a servant of the Mother."

"Not at all," Bromar said. He raised his arm and slammed the tankard against the table a hair's breadth from the woman's bent elbow. A chunk of the table disappeared, the metal tankard crumpling into an unrecognizable mass, while all around people shouted and dived for cover.

The woman slid a hand under her bowl and flung hot soup in Bromar's face. Bromar stumbled back, while the woman heaved herself to a crouch on her chair. Drawing a dagger from her belt, she somersaulted backward over the table, putting the wooden barrier between them.

Bromar scrubbed the burning liquid off his face with his sleeve. He grabbed a corner of the table and hauled it up off the floor. Gasps and cries filled the room as he lifted it over his head and flung it to the far side of the room. The table broke apart in a shower of wood and nails. Torn planks stabbed the air. Bromar walked through the wreckage toward the woman.

“Stay back!” The woman brandished her dagger in a shaking fist. To Bromar it looked like a stick.

“Call on Chauntea to aid you, filthy thief.” Bromar’s lips curled back in a snarl. He almost had her backed against the fireplace.

The woman flinched when her knees hit the stone ridge surrounding the flames. “Please, stop,” she begged.

Bromar hesitated. His fists were in the air, reaching for a throat.

Then he heard glass shattering. Splinters fell on his shoulders, and pain blackened his vision.

“About godsdamned time,” the woman muttered, her face going hard. Diving for his knees, she locked an arm around each of Bromar’s massive calves. Grunting, she lifted.

The room tilted. Bromar felt himself falling, until his head smacked the wood floor. Breath wheezed out of him, and suddenly he was back in his body and staring up at a room full of frightened strangers.

The woman stood on his left knee and pressed down with her weight. Pain exploded brilliantly all the way up Bromar’s leg. He lay still, his arms loose in surrender.

Boots echoed somewhere behind him. The innkeeper’s face filled Bromar’s vision. His elder son stood beside him, a broken glass clutched in one hand, his face pinched smooth by fear.

The innkeeper tucked an axe blade securely beneath Bromar’s chin. “That’ll be enough, friend,” he said through

clenched teeth. "You can move on now, or I can split open your skull and clean up the mess after."

"She's a fraud," Bromar said, choking when the axe blade pressed cold and heavy against his windpipe. "She stole it ... from him."

"Please, don't hurt him." the woman spoke up. "He's been on the road for days, look at his face. He's not thinking straight." "He tried to kill you," Amon said.

"Tried. But he knows I'm here to help the village, don't you, friend?" the woman said, Bromar couldn't see her face for the axe, but her voice was soothing, as if she were trying to settle a bullied child. She didn't move, and the blinding pressure on his leg did not diminish.

"Relwin was coming here to help," Bromar said, appealing to the frightened faces of the villagers. "He was looking after you, not this woman."

"And now you say he's dead," the innkeeper said, "and we need a calm head to help us, not a madman storming in here attacking my customers."

"Be easy on him, Amon. His friend's death was obviously a terrible blow," the woman said. Sadness slid off her tongue like pearls. "I will offer a prayer to Chauntea tonight, just for Relwin."

"You bitch." Bromar grabbed the axe handle with one hand and kicked out with his free leg. He had the satisfaction of feeling his boot connect with flesh and hearing the woman's pained yelp as she took her boot off his knee.

The innkeeper jerked the axe out of his hands and ground the blunt end into his cheek. "I won't warn you again!"

"I was sent here by the temple of Chauntea, in Baldur's Gate, to aid the village," Bromar cried. "I swear by the Mother!" He reached up to part his tunic, intending to expose his holy symbol.

His hand touched bare flesh, hair, and nothing else. His holy symbol was gone. Frantically, he groped for his pouch. It, too, had disappeared.

"She took it all." He went limp, defeated. Beard stubble scraped against the axe head. Bromar could smell his own unwashed body. To these people, Chauntea's children, he was a poor, exhausted, filthy figure who'd attacked a woman unprovoked. He thanked Chauntea his mentor couldn't see this.

Somewhere above him, the innkeeper's younger son whimpered. Bromar's chest tightened with regret. "Let me up," he said. "I won't cause any trouble."

"Too late for that." The innkeeper let up the pressure on the axe just enough to allow Bromar to climb to his feet. A shadow of dizziness passed over him. He stumbled and found a chair.

The woman stood a safe distance away. The rest of the patrons

filed toward the door. They cast nervous glances at Bromar as they left. Amon's sons were picking up pieces of table and sweeping broken glass into a pile.

"The boys will bring your horses when your head's clear," the innkeeper said. "Be on your way."

Bromar shook his head. "I came to help the village."

"I think you've done enough," the woman said, in that same soothing voice, a mother's voice.

Bromar ignored her and addressed Amon. "Your village is being attacked at night by a hooded man. Your message said he's very strong."

The innkeeper nodded slowly. "For the past three nights, he's come at moondark, attacks the night watch or anyone unlucky enough to be caught outside. He's killed four men. We've taken shots at him with bows from a distance, and at least one of the victims stabbed him with a sword, but it only slows him down. He always comes back."

"He doesn't breathe," a small voice spoke up.

Bromar turned to see the innkeeper's youngest standing uncertainly by the fireplace. "What do you mean?"

"I saw him," the boy said, "up close when he passed by the inn. I heard his footsteps, but I never heard him breathing."

"He'll come again tonight," Amon said.

"For the last time," the woman said.

Bromar laughed.

Amon worked the axe in his hands. "You be on your way before he comes."

"What did she promise you?" Bromar said. "In exchange for the coin you're paying her?"

"A donation to Chauntca's church is all I ask," the woman said serenely. "I will kill this man."

“Do what you like,” Bromar said. “That symbol won’t answer your prayers. Amon,” he said, “I apologize for disrupting your

house. If you let me stay, I’ll make reparations for the damage. My coin was stolen on the road”□he cast a glance at the woman□ “but I can work.” He held up his large, callused hands.

“What do you think, Milra?” the innkeeper asked, addressing the woman. “Can he be trusted?”

The woman pretended to study him. Bromar thought she was fighting a smile. “I think he’ll be harmless now,” she said. “He’s had a long journey. Some rest under a solid roof will do him good. I have no qualms if he stays.”

Amon nodded. “Fine, then. You can start out here and move on to the kitchen. Clean up and help the boys, but they stay inside.” He pitched his voice to carry to his sons.

“My thanks.” Bromar went to where the youngest boy was gathering up handfuls of broken wood. The child flinched when he came near. “It’s all right,” he said, and he started gathering up the pieces of broken table.

When he’d finished clearing out the mess he took up the broom himself and swept the floor. Amon stayed to watch him, wiping down the bar one last time before he went upstairs.

The woman stayed in the common room, her feet up on one of the tables, hands folded behind her head.

“You missed some splinters,” she said.

Bromar tightened his grip on the broom, but he had control of himself now.

"I could have taken your head," he said.

"I thank you for your restraint," the woman said. She stuck out her lip in a pout. "I don't suppose we can be friends?"

He straightened. "Milra. Is that your name?"

Milra nodded.

"Why did you move his body, Milra?" Bromar asked. "Was it just to torment me? You took a big risk. What if I'd woken?"

"Small chance of that," Milra said. "To look at you, you might have been dead. I watched you digging and thought it

was your own grave." She fingered the holy symbol hanging between her breasts.

"You shouldn't have touched him," Bromar said.

"So I should have taken it off him in that hole?" Milra looked aghast. "That's sacrilege."

Bromar stared at her. He couldn't tell whether she was serious or not. "Chauntea sees you," he said. "I ask you, don't interfere with Her work. Leave this village and you can keep what you've stolen. I won't hinder you."

"You'd best not." Milra stood up, stretched. "Don't worry. I intend to earn my keep this time. Killing one man who lurks at night—how hard could it be?"

"You don't know what you're doing."

“We’ll see. But don’t worry” Milra touched Relwin’s holy symbol “I see what this means to you. You can have it back, when all’s done.”

“And the other?” Bromar asked.

“Yours I’ll sell.”

He watched her saunter up the stairs.

Bromar moved on to the kitchen. Amon’s boys were hauling the soup pot between them toward a bucket of soapy water. “Let me help you,” Bromar said.

He stepped forward. The youngest boy dropped the handle he was holding. The pot sagged, bouncing off the elder’s toe.

“Ow, watch your wits, Toran!” the boy snarled. He took his brother by the shoulder and pulled him out of Bromar’s path.

Picking up the pot with one hand, Bromar set it down next to the bucket. He fished a brush out of the water and started scrubbing the soup scum off the belly of the pot.

“You should wash your own hands.” he said good-naturedly to Toran. The boy’s palms were stained green, as if he’d been rolling around in the grass.

The two boys were silent. They stood uncomfortably, watching him. Toran’s mouth hung open. “What’s wrong?” Bromar asked him.

The child swallowed. “You’re so... big,” he said to Bromar. His brother nudged him hard. “Stop it, Rait!”

Bromar chuckled. The sound echoed in the soup pot. "I am. Chauntea made me strong."

"Why?" Toran asked, taking a step forward before he remembered to be afraid.

"So I can help other lives grow," Bromar said, "and protect those weaker than myself. To help them flourish."

The older boy, Rait, snorted. Bromar glanced up at him. "You've a fine inn here. You and your father must be very proud."

"Are you really going to kill him?" Rait said. "You and the cleric?"

"She is no servant of Chauntea." Bromar said. "And yes, I will kill this man. It's why I came here."

"Father will help you," Toran said. He wadded up his apron and threw it in a basket in the corner. "He's a great warrior."

"Is that so?" Bromar said.

"Hush. Toran," Rait said, but the little boy gripped Bromar's arm excitedly.

"You should see them," he said, "father's trophies ..."

"That's enough." Rait took the boy's arm and pushed him toward the common room. "Time for bed. 'Flic nice stranger can finish up in here." He shot a glare at Bromar before following his brother.

Bromar finished cleaning the pot and left it to dry before the kitchen fire. He went outside to check the horses and his gear.

From the stables, he had a clear view of the village center. He went back to his saddlebags and retrieved his armor and weapon, along with his helmet. He'd taken them off before entering the inn, so he wouldn't appear threatening. A wasted exercise.

He slid on his chain vest, the metal flakes clicking against his gauntlets. His helmet was old and dented on one side by a blow—a man's attack, not a monster's. He wondered which he faced tonight.

As night's heart crept closer, the lanterns in the dooryards and windows stayed lit, casting spotty golden glows up and down the main village street. Faces moved in front of second story windows, though he couldn't make out their features.

Amon came out of the inn's front door and sat on a stool beneath the new sign. He put a sword across his knees. Bromar watched him raise a hand to someone across the street and saw movement on one of the roofs. A middle-aged man crawled out on the roof with a bow and waited. The whole village held its breath.

When he came, he walked out of the forest. Bromar saw a coney dart from the underbrush in his path and tear off into one of the yards. The man walked hunched over as if carrying a great weight. He moved through the village, but the light didn't reach him. He wore a black hood that completely obscured his face and neck. Gloves covered his hands, and he wore a stained linen shirt and pants. He walked unevenly in his boots, as if one of his legs were shorter than the other.

He shouldn't even be calling it a man, Bromar thought. There was no knowing what the thing was, but it walked steadily in the direction of The Bone Bird.

In his peripheral vision, Bromar saw Amon stand up. The door opened, and Milra joined the innkeeper on the porch.

The walking man was halfway to the inn door.

He took another step forward. An arrow shriek sounded in the night. Bromar watched the missile streak from a rooftop and bury itself in the walking man's flank. He squinted, but he couldn't tell from this distance if the arrow had pierced flesh or armor. The walking man paused, his hand groping for the shaft, but after a breath or two he left it and kept walking, his stride unbroken, toward the inn.

Behind Bromar, the horses snuffled and bucked in their stalls. Bromar saw the whites of their eyes. Then he smelled what they smelted and almost gagged. A chemical odor, and badly preserved meat. But the pervading stench was one he knew well. Deep, cool earth, the freshly worked grave.

Bromar reached instinctively for his holy symbol. When he remembered where it was, he drew his weapon shalt to his chest. The scythe blade was as long as his arm, a curved fin that ended in a stabbing point. He used the shaft to push open the stable door. He crossed the inn yard, blade pointed to the moonlight, and stepped into a circle of illumination from a nearby house.

The man—the thing—saw him and stopped walking. It turned, angling its body to face Bromar fully. It stood a head shorter than Bromar, but more heavily muscled, its legs and arms so thick Bromar wondered how it moved.

Hooded face still in shadow, the thing moved toward him, picking up its pace into a run. Bromar charged, the scythe framing his body like a claw.

The thing was too slow to react. Bromar swung and landed a slicing blow to the middle of the thing's chest. He heard fabric tear and flesh part over bone. The scythe blade whistled through the air; Bromar had to strain to pull the weapon free.

Instead of blood, black pus clung to the metal, dripping strings of filth onto the road. The chemical smell intensified, and the thing let out a gurgling moan.

"Back into the earth, you most foul!" Bromar cried.
"Corruptor of the Cycle—you who scorn Chauntea's grace."

Light ran up his scythe shaft, kissing the blade in gold. Bromar reversed the scythe for another slice, this time aimed at the thing's neck, but it ducked and caught the shaft. Bromar's shoulder blade cracked under the pressure of having his swing halted in midair. Chemical reek and decay washed over Bromar

as the thing pressed close. It took one hand off the scythe shaft and swiped at Bromar's face.

Bromar dodged, but he felt the blow glance off his cheekbone. Pain exploded down his jaw, and a fierce ringing stabbed his ears. The punch had barely grazed him. but he was falling, the thing bearing him to the ground with a tremendous, boulder weight.

He reached up, vision hazy, and grabbed for the thing's hood. The cloth tore away, and Bromar's back hit the ground so hard he lay dazed, trying to draw breath.

The thing bent over him, its gloved hands pressed against Bromar's chest. The cloth barrier did nothing to mask the rot stench, but Bromar hardly noticed. He'd been snared by the thing's face.

A human face, and a parody of a man's, two bloodshot eyes that moved like a clockwork toy's, wrinkled flesh papered with nails, hair and torn meat from the corpses it had handled—these things, and the hands on him, made Bromar's stomach clench with vile revulsion. But the worst sight of all was the thing's mouth. Pale maggot bulges for lips, pulled taut by the black thread worked up and down in crooked stitches, scaling the thing's mouth shut and leaving only the impression of teeth through the tightly sewn flesh.

Behind a nest of filthy black hair, Bromar saw the woman, Milra, looming suddenly in the moonlight. She brought a dagger to bear in the middle of the thing's back. Hollering, she buried the blade deep and twisted, wrenching it to the side and off of Bromar.

The thing turned, and when Milra saw what Bromar had seen, her face went ashen. The dagger broke out of her hand. The weapon stayed snug in the thing's flesh, but it may as well have been a worm burrowing into a corpse, for the thing paid it no heed.

Bromar heard footsteps running hard toward them and turned

to see Amon charging. He raised his axe for a chop aimed to split the thing's skull.

"Get back!" Bromar shouted. "It's too strong."

The thing moved, quicker than Bromar would have thought possible, and the axe came down on its shoulder as if on unforgiving stone. The shock wave went straight up the axe and into Amon's hands. The innkeeper dropped the axe and tried to get out of the way as the thing swiped at him.

Bromar dived, hitting Amon from the side, driving them both out of the thing's path. The innkeeper's temple struck the ground and he went senseless, his body a dead weight on top of Bromar. Milra came at the thing's flank with another dagger, digging into the flesh and the black blood.

"Father!"

The small voice came from behind the undead horror. Bromar, pinned with the innkeeper half on top of him, shouted, "Get back, Toran! Milra, help him!"

But the thing whirled, and Milra took a club blow square to her chest. Bromar heard a sick, wet crunch sound and saw the undead's hand almost disappear into the concave of the woman's chest. Milra fell flat on her back and didn't move.

It was all happening too fast. Bromar heaved Amon's body away from him, but the undead had already turned on the boy. Toran stood rooted, his gaze caught by the thing's face. It reared back for another blow. Bromar grabbed his scythe.

Then it stopped. Its back was to Bromar; he couldn't see the thing's expression, if it even experienced emotions. Toran took a step back and fell, his hands going out instinctively to catch himself.

The undead lunged, grabbed the boy's arms and pulled him to his feet and into the air. Bromar heard another sharp crunch as the thing snapped the child's wrists.

Toran screamed. As the thing drew him up, the boy fainted,

but the undead held the child easily in its hands. It lifted the boy by his broken wrists, pressing the small hands to its nose, its sewn lips. A mewling, horrible cry broke from its

throat, whistling through the thread. The thing hefted the boy and loped off in the direction of the forest.

No, Bromar thought. “No, here! Here!” Bromar shouted. He used the scythe shaft to lever himself to his feet. His head was still swimming from the blow to his cheek. “Fight me, you godsdamncd creature!”

He swung the scythe, aiming at the thing’s legs, hoping to slow it down. The blow cut air and threw him off balance. Dizziness rushed over him. He fell to his knees, couldn’t think, and couldn’t move.

In his mind, his mentor’s dead eyes were staring at him through a wool shroud. Then the monster was gone, disappeared into the forest with the child dangling from its grip like a much-loved doll.

When Bromar regained sense enough, he and Amon picked up Milra and went back inside The Bone Bird. A cluster of townspeople, many of whom he recognized from earlier in the night, tended to the innkeeper and the rogue, though Bromar could see the latter was much worse off. Rait sat next to his father. The boy’s wide eyes threatened to swallow his pale face.

“She’s not breathing.” said a woman.

“Let me through,” Bromar said, nudging aside the townspeople to get to Milra. He swallowed when he saw the condition of her chest. He reached for her neck pouch.

A hand closed over his arm. It barely covered half the circumference. “What are you doing?” one of the men demanded.

Bromar gently but firmly disengaged the man's fingers. He reached into Milra's pouch and found his holy symbol. It fit comfortably in his large palm. He laid a hand over Milra's heart and murmured a prayer.

When he'd finished, he drew back and turned to Amon.

"You didn't do anything," Rait said. His shrill voice cut into Bromar. "You're no holy man."

"Hush, Rait," his father said.

"He let that thing take Toran!" Rait was on his feet and in Bromar's path, though his head barely cleared Bromar's chest.

Bromar put his hands on the boy's shoulders. "She's already gone. There's nothing I can do. Now I need to tend your father before I go after your brother."

Rait's gaze was frozen on the dead woman's. He sucked in shallow breaths of air. Bromar patted him on the back and nodded to one of the men standing nearby. "Get him some water."

He went to Amon and put his hand on the side of the innkeeper's face where a large bruise swelled. "Sorry about that," he said.

"No need." Amon said. His voice was remote. "Won't slow me down."

Bromar nodded. He whispered a prayer and his fingers warmed against Amon's temple. The innkeeper flinched when he felt the heat.

"It's all right," Bromar said. The heat faded, and the blood-filled wound slowly healed, the skin returning to its normal, healthy color.

A collective murmur slid through the crowd. Amon touched his temple and looked at Bromar. Wild hope dawned in his eyes. "Chauntea's servant," he said.

Bromar nodded. "You'll be fine. Now we need to find your son."

"I can track him in the forest," Amon said. He started to get up, but Bromar put a hand on his shoulder.

"That's not what I need," he said. "Do you know what that thing is?" He pitched his voice loud enough for the other townspeople to hear.

Amon shook his head. "It isn't alive," he said.

"No, it's not," Bromar said, "it's made to unearth and entomb, and it was created by an even greater servant of evil, a necromancer."

"Why does it want Toran?" Amon said. "Why didn't it" he choked on the words "kill him, like it did the others?"

"Because of his hands," Bromar said. "It smelled something on the boy's hands, something it was sent here by its master to find." He looked at Rait. "A trophy."

"Father!" Rait cried, and father and son shared a look of horror that told Bromar all he needed to know.

"What is it?" Bromar said. "What's it after?"

Amon seemed in a daze. Rait grabbed his father's arm to support him. "Come with me." he said to Bromar.

They went out the back entrance, where a small yard housed a vegetable garden and storage shed. Beyond there was a tall fence built against the encroaching Cloak Wood.

But over the mundane scene floated a strange scent, and restlessness, like malevolent eyes staring from the shadows. At first Bromar attributed it to the dark forest looming beyond the fence.

Then he turned to face the inn's broad back wall.

"Mother of all," he whispered. "The bone bird."

The skeletal breast hovered above the door. Talons easily half as long as Bromar's body flared out to either side of the entry, as if the great bird remained poised to strike anyone who approached the building. The neck curved toward the apex of the roof, where the intact skull kept sightless guard, its hooked beak secured with rope. Wing bones had been shattered in several places and replaced with wood, giving the outstretched appendages a mottled, fleshy appearance that made Bromar's skin crawl.

"Why did you do this?" he said, voice barely audible.

The townspeople, curious, had filed out into the yard behind them, but none of them appeared surprised or sickened at the sight of the roc skeleton hanging from the inn wall.

Rait stepped forward. "Father slew it in the forest. He's a great warrior." he added, almost defensively.

"It was a message," Amon said.

Bromar stared at him in disbelief. "To whom?"

The innkeeper jerked his head toward the forest. "To that," he said. "Every year it gets a little closer, almost like the godsdamned trees are alive. We get attacked by beasts and monsters when we stray too close. It's a warning."

"It's an idol of false pride," Bromar said. "You didn't kill this creature."

Amon's face blanched. "You calling mc a liar?"

The two men stared at each other. The crowd shifted uneasily. "Would you swear on Toran's life that you killed this beast?" Bromar said quietly.

Standing as they were, it appeared to Bromar that the roc hovered over the innkeeper, waiting to stab the talons deep. Amon's face crumpled. Tears shone in his eyes.

Bromar nodded. "The necromancer must have injured it. It flew far away into the forest to die. That's when he dispatched the undead." He looked at Amon. "Where is the roc's egg?"

"Upstairs, in a trunk," Amon said. He held his hands over his face. "Rait."

The boy nodded and ran back inside the inn.

"That's why the undead took Toran," Bromar explained. "Your boy has had his hands all over the egg. The creature can smell it. Its master bred it well—grave digger and scent hound. Roc eggs are valuable to wizards."

Bromar couldn't stand to look at the perverted skeleton any longer. He went back inside the inn, Amon and the people

trailing behind him.

Rait hauled the egg into the common room and with the help of one of the townspeople put it on a table. It was white, stained by dirt and cracks running along the base. Bromar touched his fingers to one of the fissures. They came away dripping a sickly green liquid.

"It's a dead egg," he said. "Nothing will hatch from this." But the necromancer didn't know that, and neither did his entomber servant. The undead's only compulsion was to complete its task. "Tell me where you found the roc's body," he said to Amon.

"Toran's boy knows he's not supposed to root through my private things," Amon said feebly.

"He's just a boy," Bromar said, "proud of his father's trophies."

Dawn cast tentative threads of light through the Cloak Wood, with its Black Elms and Hawthorn and crawling weeds.

He followed a small foot path Amon had told him to take for speed. Moving through the trees at a half run, Bromar thought he might be able to head the undead off, burdened though he was with dead weight. The egg rode cold against his back, a half-formed corpse in a shell.

After a time he saw the first torn-down trees.

The roc had apparently glided down, wings spread, and torn some of the smaller saplings up by the roots as it lost control. Death wounds drove it into the ground at a steep angle. Bromar's boot sank a little in soft dirt, and when he looked down he saw the long furrows the bird's talons had

scraped into the earth. Weed and grass and stone had all been hurled aside, making it look as if a terrible storm had descended on just this spot, forming a small, wrecked clearing.

Bromar set his burden down at the base of a broken tree. Darkness clung stubbornly to the forest, but he didn't light

another sun rod. He wanted to surprise the thing coming—and it would come, Bromar was certain. They'd injured the thing enough that it would have to come here to rest before going back to its master.

Automatically, Bromar's hand went to the holy symbol hanging against his chest. It occurred to him then that he hadn't removed his mentor's symbol from Milra's body. The townspeople would likely bury her with it.

"Return her body to the land," Bromar prayed aloud. He closed his eyes. "We are all Chauntea's children."

He heard a sound. The prayer fresh on his lips, Bromar spun to face the entomber emerging from the brush, Toran dragging unconscious at his side.

Bromar raised his holy symbol. Sunlight blazed in the clearing, an explosion of midday warmth that drove back the shadows. The trees that were still whole bent their branches hungrily toward the light. The land itself drew inward toward Bromar's body.

"Goddess take you down into the dark places," Bromar said, his voice an intonation that crawled over the dead thing's skin. The entomber dropped Toran to the ground. Black liquid dripped from the cracks between its stitched lips. It took a cautious step forward, testing the force of the light, the burn against its dead flesh.

“That’s it,” Bromar whispered, “come ahead.” He reached behind himself and pulled the wrappings off the roc egg. When the entomber got close enough, it would smell the strong juices and know it had found what it sought. The only thing standing in its way was Bromar.

The undead advanced on him. It raised a hand to shield its eyes from the scorching light.

“Chauntea, be with mc,” Bromar chanted. “Take my body and banish this evil.”

Light filled his hand, eclipsing the rose and grain. Wind sighed like music through the trees. The entomber howled in its throat and clawed at the stitches binding its lips. It bent over and charged Bromar.

Bromar grabbed his scythe and swung, the blade catching light and holding it. It sliced cleanly through the thing’s left arm. The severed appendage dropped to the ground, black liquid curdling the grass.

Still, the dead thing charged.

It hit Bromar in the chest with its remaining arm, knocking him back into the roc’s talon furrow. Bromar raised his hands to ward off the next blow, but it didn’t come.

Instead, the entomber slammed his fist against the lip of the furrow. A shower of dirt and rock rained down on Bromar, blinding him. Another blow, then another—Bromar could feel the earth trembling as the entomber collapsed it on top of him.

Frantically, Bromar tried to get his feet under him, but the dirt was too heavy. It filled his eyes, his mouth and nostrils.

He clawed his face, trying to catch his breath. F.vcrywherc there was the grave dirt. He choked on it.

Chauntea! Mother, no, not this. Please.

He couldn't reach his holy symbol. His arms and legs were locked in place, and the only sound was the pounding earth, but even that was growing fainter as the entomber did its work.

Bromar's heart thundered in his chest. He tried to draw breath, but there were no air pockets, no space. Soon his body would be racked by convulsions as his lungs demanded air it couldn't reach. Then he would drown in the dirt.

A black haze swamped Bromar's mind, and he let out his own wordless, mad howl. The sound stayed trapped in his throat, his mouth stitched shut by worm-eaten dirt.

Desperately, Bromar pulled back from the brink, the last madness, and focused instead on what he could feel—cold earth

stroked his skin, but his holy symbol had been pressed against his chest by the dirt.

In his fading consciousness, his mentor's words came back to him. "This death is part of Chauntca's burden. We accept the bloom with the decay. One serves the other."

Death and life, Bromar thought. We are all Chauntca's children.

Mother, he prayed silently. Take my body. Use me. Heat flared at his chest. Bromar imagined the rose burning red,

the light curling outward through the violated earth. Take my body. Use me.

Tickling warmth brushed against Bromar's skin. He had a brief, mad image of worms swarming up to consume his flesh, but the sensation was not cold or wet. Warm, smooth tendrils crossed his stomach, his arms and legs. The scent filled his nostrils—new grass, the first green in spring. Life swelled around him, forced its way through the earth, and began to lift.

As the green tendrils spread and thickened, bearing Bromar's weight up through the dirt. The warmth at his chest was like a miniature sun, a beating, golden heart from which all other life sprang.

Bromar's body broke the surface, his lungs expanded, and the air was a blessing. He spat dirt and wiped it from his eyes, rolling onto his stomach to draw in the scent of new life.

When he could see, Bromar noticed two things. The egg and the entomber were gone. There was no sign of them in the clearing. Toran lay where the undead had dropped him. Unconscious, but alive. Bromar could see the boy's chest rising and falling.

"Thank you, Mother," he whispered.

He crawled to Toran's side and gently picked up the boy's shattered wrists. He prayed, and the light came. The bones mended, and the light spread through the boy's body, chasing away the stench of death and decay.

Bromar rubbed the pads of his thumbs against the boy's hands. "Toran," he said gently. "Awake."

The boy stirred, and his eyes fluttered open. When he saw Bromar, he sighed, the air rushing out of him, and he went limp with relief.

"It's you," he said.

Bromar nodded. "I've come to take you home."

He helped the boy sit up slowly. Toran's gaze came to rest on something over Bromar's shoulder, and his eyes widened.

"Where did that come from?" he said.

Bromar turned. The tree had grown straight out of the talon furrow. Everything around it still lay in ruin, but the tree's branches fanned out protectively over the clearing, its roots dug deep into the earth.

"It came from here," Bromar said, pointing to his chest. "My life was fading, so I offered it to the earth, and the tree grew even as I was dying. It saved me."

Toran reached out and touched Bromar's still warm holy symbol. "Feels nice," he said, but the fear lingered. "What about the monster?"

Bromar stared into the forest depths. "It's gone," he said, "back to its master. It won't come again."

He hadn't been strong enough to kill the monster. But Bromar thought of the rotting egg, the disappointment seething in a faceless evil when he found out his servant's quest had been in vain. From this he took some comfort.

Chauntea's burden, he thought. Death is all around us.

“But not here,” he said, staring up at the newborn tree. “Not now.”

Feast of the Moon

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the hills of the dead kings

/ Nightal. the Year of the Plagued Lords (1471 DR)

The tiger roared, the corpse of his kill steaming under his claws. His nostrils flared wide at the scent of blood, but he did not yet bend to feed; he sensed still more succulent prey.

A dappled black horse stamped the ground nearby, so close the tiger could have covered the intervening distance with a single spring. But the tiger waited, suspicious. A grass-eating herd beast might make for a more tender meal than the gristle and sinew of an old boar, but even a seasoned war-horse should have been screaming and fleeing, not tossing its head and coming even closer.

The tiger growled lowed in his throat and crouched in preparation for a killing leap. But then he fell silent and cocked a tufted ear toward the horse. The tiger did not understand what he heard as words, but somehow a message came into his feral mind.

You are not a tiger, said the horse. You are a man: Jaeg.

It was that last word, "Jaeg," that brought the man out of the jeast. Muscles rippled and shifted. Jaeg Felidac, Huntmaster of the Arkaiuns, dropped to his knees and slumped forward, leaning on one scarred hand.

When his chest slopped heaving and he could speak again, the Arkaiun tribesman turned his face up into the rain pouring out of the autumn sky. "Praise to the Beastlord," he whispered.

The horse picked her way carefully through the trampled grass to his side. The rotting month of Uktar had just passed, and the arkhas grass that covered the plains of Dambrath was dead, returning to the soil for another winter. Slicked with rain, the dead grass made for treacherous footing.

“Blood drenches this ground. Koza, said Jacg, reaching up and grasping the mare’s mane. The horse raised her neck, pulling her master to his feet. “Drenches and sanctifies it.”

Recovered from his transformation from one form of deadly predator to another, the tribesman began the low, growling Bloodchant of the priests of Malar. As he chanted, he took a knife from his rope belt and butchered the carcass of the boar.

You came down from the Gnollswatch seeking sustenance in a lean time, old warrior, thought Jacg, maintaining his droning song even as he paid homage to his prey with his thoughts. Now your bones and blood will sustain my High Hunt prayer.

Each season. Malar the Beastlord called his followers to the High Hunt. On the plains of Dambrath, whoever led the cult among Arkaiun horsemen performed a nocturnal ritual to roust the deadliest prey within a day’s ride. Months before, the grim priestess who had initiated Jaeg into the mysteries left on the night of the Highharvestidc feast and never returned.

As he sawed through muscle and sinew, Jacg wondered if he would be sent to hunt the prey that had bested his master.

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The moon was just a night short of full. Through a break in the racing clouds, it rose huge and yellow as Jaeg bent to his

sacred work, deepening the shadows cast by the low Hills of the Dead Kings.

Using nothing but the razor edge of his flensing knife and the strength of his own arms, the horseman shaped the long bones and rib cage of the boar into an altar. With blood-drenched hands, he crowned the heap of meat and entrails atop the altar with the boar's savage tusks. Then, calling on the same primal energies that enabled his transformation into a tiger, he lit a holy-fire beneath the altar. A column of smoke rose up into the night sky, drawing a thick, black line across Selune's face.

With the smoke, rose a prayer.

"Beat the grasslands, Lord of the Beasts," said Jaeg. "Sound the hunting horns. Set me on the trail of the deadliest prey."

With the last elements of the ritual complete, Jaeg felt his awareness spreading out from where he crouched by the altar.

First to the south, into the darkening plains. There, Jaeg felt the hot breath of his god behind him, chasing him across the endless miles of grasslands and shallow rivers. Jaeg counted some mighty hunters among both his families on the plains, the Arkaiun tribes and the rare black Dambrathan tigers. The impossibly huge, ravaging consciousness driving him turned east.

Across the River Ammath. the plains gave way to the brackish fens and bayous of the Southern Lluirwood. Creatures with crimson scales wielded fell sorcery there, ruled by a demonic serpent prince whom Jaeg felt the Bcastlord pause and consider, briefly, before his mind was flying back north and west, into the hills.

The Hills of the Dead Kings were held sacred by the Arkaiuns because their ancient rulers were entombed beneath them in secret, hidden crypts. The tribes did not hunt there, though, leaving the territory to the hin who lived in scattered villages and farmsteads. But Malar did not find prey for his servant among the halflings, or among the scrawny wolves who harried their sheep.

Instead, Jaeg felt his mind rushing up a narrow valley between two steep hillsides. A creek swollen by the rainy season storms

flowed fast beneath him, but not nearly so fast as Jaeg's remote awareness as he plunged down to the base of one of the hills, where a watch fire burned outside an ancient stone door, broken open to the night.

The Beastlord had the trail now, and Jaeg felt as if his soul was being battered and dragged along behind the invisible, awful presence of his dark god. Then all sense of motion abruptly halted, and behind the glowing bone embers of his altar fire, Jaeg saw the flickering torches held by a half dozen halfling adventurers beneath a hill many leagues to the north.

One of their number brushed cenrurics of dust from the deeply carved runes tracing the edge of a slate door. He saw a hin wizard raise her staff, and then he saw no more, because all of his other senses failed as Malar gifted him with the overwhelming scent of his prey—the overwhelming scent of death. Jacg sensed that he had just learned the fate of Selina Huntmistress.

A priest of Malar was always hunting, and an Arkaiun was always prepared to ride, so Jacg could have leaped upon Koza and sounded the double click of his tongue to set her

running instantly. But Jaeg was as careful in stalking as he was ferocious in killing, so he enacted one more ritual.

The smell of whatever prey his god had set him against lay over his senses like a patina of filth. Jacg could feel the thing's presence to the north as a reek that both beckoned and repelled him. The scent was so overpowering, though, that he doubted he would be able to pinpoint its exact location in the unfamiliar territory, at least not in the single day's time allotted to a High Hunt in the cult rites. A wise hunter knows when to seek a guide.

With speed and precision born of long practice, Jacg scratched a pair of interlocking symbols into the turf with his knife's point, chanting softly under his breath all the while. The fire

that had consumed his makeshift altar had almost burned out, but he sat between it and the hills so that any creature looking down onto the plains would see him, clearly silhouetted. Jaeg wanted to be found.

He did not have to wait long.

He's coming, said Koza across the link that bound them.

The horse's sense of smell was apparently unaffected by the miasma that dampened his own. Jaeg peered into the night, and finally saw the jackrabbit edging its way nervously toward him.

"Little brother," said Jaeg, and the rabbit twitched its huge ears forward. "There are hounds in the hills tonight, far from their own dens. They are at an old stone burrow that smells of death. Take me there."

Jacg's reflexes were preternaturally swift, but even he was startled by how quickly the rabbit sprang into the night. With a soft curse, he leaped to his feet and grabbed a handful of Koza's mane as she ran past, already in pursuit.

The only tack used among the Arkaiuns was the Three Circles, a great loop of rope woven from arkhas grass. Jaeg slid his left hand under the circle that wound around Koza's chest, while his feet found the two smaller loops that served as stirrups.

Koza was numbered among the swiftest mounts on the plains, but even she was hard pressed to keep up with the bounding guide that led them ever deeper into the Hills of the Dead Kings. Even when the clouds intermittently parted and Selune's light flooded down on the bare hilltops, Jaeg only had vague impressions of gentle slopes and swift streams, and once of a ring of ancient standing stones.

When Koza finally halted at Jacg's signal, her chest was heaving and the sky was graying with dawn. The rabbit they had chased through the darkest hours of morning was nowhere to be seen in the growing light, but Jaeg recognized the creek bed where they stood from his vision.

Moving quickly, the hunter unknotted the Three Circles and coiled them in the sheltered base of a stony outcrop. He pulled up handfuls of dead grass and rubbed Koza down, glad to see that she had not broken fully into a lather despite her heroic effort.

"I am going to hunt, now, sister," he told her. "Rest."

Rest, she echoed, wearily tossing her head.

Jaeg prepared himself for the transformation again, but then halted. He had pulled Koza from her mother himself, and

stayed continuously in her presence for the first full year of her life—a necessity for a horse whose rider bore the scent of a deadly predator. In all the seasons since, they had rarely been apart, except for those times, like this, when the hunt or the demands of his stern god called him away. But he had never before felt compelled to tell her this.

“Stay hidden if you can. And if I do not find you by nightfall, return to the plains. You can find the tribe if you like, or seek your way with the wild herds.”

Koza expressed worry and confusion in Jaeg’s mind. Where will you be!

Jaeg let the transformation begin to overtake him and turned away from Koza, already stalking, already seeking his prey. But he sent her one last thought.

“I will be waiting for you in Deep Wilds,” he said. “In the next world.”

The tiger pawed at his nose restlessly, trying to rub the smell of corruption away. He made no sound, though, for he lay in wait for whatever emitted the miasma over the world.

The predator was stretched low on a hilltop, looking down into a foggy dell. The bodies of four halflings and a half dozen ponies and pack mules lay strewn among the remnants of a camp

beside a creek. From all appearances, (he corpses had lay rotting there for tendays.

The part of the tiger that was Jaeg was disturbed by that fact. These creatures had all been alive not long before, according to his vision.

The only movement the tiger sensed was the running creek. No animals came down to drink from the water. No carrion birds descended to pick at the corpses. More disturbing facts.

Then the tiger did sense movement, if barely. A halfling, no, two of the creatures, appeared on the hillside above the abattoir of a camp.

Seeking clarity of thought, Jaeg willed himself back into the form of a man, but stayed lying stretched on the ground. In the throes of the ecstatic vision gifted to him by the Beast lord the night before, he had not taken careful note of the individual hin inside the ancient tomb. But he did not believe these two had been among them.

They wore leather armor under cloaks of gray and green that blended into the hillside. Moving cautiously and quietly, they frequently halted for minutes at a time, almost disappearing into the background. They moved like Jaeg himself.

Hunters? Or warriors, seeking vengeance on the slayer of their kin.

Either way, they were rivals. He would not allow them to poach his prey.

Though perhaps it would be instructive if he allowed them to draw it out.

The pair finally made their way down to the valley floor. They moved among the corpses, studying each, even the beasts. By the bodies of their fellow hin, they took care to make a series of gestures that Jaeg guessed was part of a prayer to some halfling god. At last, they stood facing each other and threw back the hoods of their cloaks.

The only clear difference between the two women was the cut of their chestnut hair. One of the twins wore hers cropped short, while the other wore a long, thick braid. They appeared to be speaking to one another, but Jaeg doubted he would have been able to overhear them even if he were hidden within the camp itself.

They must have come to an agreement, because they each took one last long look around, this time looking up as well, studying the hills and the valley. Except when he shifted from one form to another, Jaeg had not moved a muscle as tiger or man since he had settled above the camp. He did not move now. He had chosen his position with care, a spot from which he could see the camp and the entrance to the tomb, but which would not leave him silhouetted against the rising sun. The pelts that made up his own cloak were as effective a camouflage as the twins' dyed wools.

Despite all that, one of the sisters paused for several heartbeats, appearing to look directly at him. Then her stare moved on up the valley.

Hunters, Jaeg decided.

Satisfied they were leaving no immediate threats behind them, the sisters turned to face the worn stones of the tomb's entrance. They loosened their short swords in their scabbards and shook life into crystal rods that began to emit a pale white light. Then, at some signal invisible to Jaeg, they strode directly to the tomb.

And dropped to the ground, shouting warnings to each other.

Jaeg barely saw the orb of black muck that flew out of the entryway at the halflings, so swiftly did it fly. Only when it splashed against a boulder by the creek, clinging to the

stone and emitting oily smoke, did he realize that he had recoiled, breaking his predator's stillness.

He tore his eyes from the filth bubbling on the rocks and looked past the sisters, who were already scrambling for cover

and drawing swords. The shadowed entrance of the tomb grew dark as pitch as it filled with a creature so tall its head scraped the apex of the archway.

No, thought Jaeg. It's not so tall as that. It's flying!

And it was, if inelegantly. The thing came fully into the light, ignoring the darts the halflings flung at it from where they hid among the rocks. It floated upright, its power of flight apparently unconnected to the tattered, asymmetrical bat wings that sprouted from its slender shoulders. Curved black horns protruded from its forehead directly above its glowing red eyes, and its long, ungainly arms ended in hands glittering with black talons.

The thing glistened in the growing light, coated with a thick black liquid that oozed from every pore. Filth dripped from its twisted feet as it slowly floated out into the camp, leaving a trail of corruption.

The scent of the monster was so thick that tears came to Jaeg's eyes, but then he realized it was not the scent alone that caused the tears.

"This. Lord of the Beasts?" he whispered. "This is your chosen prey?" The prey that had bested his master. The prey he must now hunt down.

The thing spread its arms wide, in much the same manner Jaeg had spread his arms above the altar hours before. More

spheres of filth flew outward toward the desperately dodging halflings in a mockery of a blessing.

The halflings retreated, flinging their useless darts at the rotting angel in attempts to distract it and cover each other. The putrid thing waved aside the missiles almost lazily, barely moving as it swayed above the corpses of the halflings' kin, covering the bodies in an ever-deepening pool of the corruption that flowed off its body.

Even before the transformation had begun, Jaeg brought his legs up beneath himself and leaped. He dived down the hillside, twisting and falling, and as he twisted and fell, he transformed. It was not the man but the great hunting cat that ran full tilt down into the valley, roaring a challenge that would frighten even the boldest prey into immobility.

Not this prey, though. Hearing the tiger's call through its desiccated ears, the rot angel turned its attention from the fleeing halflings to this new threat. The tiger moved so quickly that by the time the angel saw him, the beast had cleared the creek and was in midair again, teeth bared and claws extended.

The tiger felt some of the monster's ribs give way as the impact of the attack bore the thing down to the ground. But there was another feeling too, a white hot pain followed by an ominous... nothing. Before the angel could bring its claws up his sides, the tiger leaped again, only to stumble, confused by the weakness in his limbs and unsure of his fooling.

Holding up one paw, the tiger saw that his talons gleamed no more, that instead of being razor sharp they were brown and brittle. Even the silky fur topping his paw had changed from black to dull gray.

Alarmed, the tiger took another few faltering steps away from the angel, which was slowly rising back up into the air. The tiger growled at the thing, which responded only by reaching over its own left shoulder and wrenching the wing there back into something approximating the position it had held when it floated out of the tomb.

Dimly, Jaeg realized that he must have time to heal before he could hunt. When the tiger splashed across to the opposite bank, the rot angel did not follow.

Moments later, the hunter was seated with his back to a tree in a copse of pines just upstream from the tomb. Jaeg grimaced when he saw his unmoving left hand. It was gray and twisted, as if the hand of a corpse had been sewn to the end of his arm.

Instinctively, he prayed words of healing over the injury, but stumbled over the words when he realized that he was praying to the god who had apparently willed the damage to happen.

Perhaps in response to his faltering—or perhaps because of the deadly power that was invested in his prey's very flesh—his hand did not grow whole. Feeling and movement returned, and it was not the hand of a corpse that Jaeg now bore. But neither was it a match for his right hand, for his left hand now had the appearance of one belonging to an old man. Flexing it, Jaeg felt that it only had the strength of an old man's hand as well.

Revelation followed realization, in the impression of a ghostly voice that formed in Jaeg's head. The voice was that of Selina, the priestess who had preceded Jaeg as Huntmaster. The Beasimaster's legacy is the winnowing of the weak.

This is a challenge, thought Jaeg, desperate to regain the surety of unquestioning faith. This is a holy challenge, and every challenge should be treated as a hunt.

Jaeg sprang to his feet and walked boldly out of the sheltering wood. A bow shot downstream, the rot angel still floated serenely above the carnage it had dealt the halfling tomb breakers. It slowly rotated toward Jaeg as he waded the creek and continued to stride directly toward it.

And then, for reasons he could not comprehend, his prey fled before him.

The High Hunt of the Feast of the Moon was over half done. He had found his prey and tested himself against it, and had been, briefly, bested, just as his master had been bested before him. Jaeg still did not know whether it would be the hunter or the hunted that would provide the night's final sacrifice to the Beastlord, but his briefly shaken faith grew stronger with each

moment he spent tracking the angel's fell spoor, with each league that his loping stride covered.

The tiger quickly grew used to losing sight of his prey in the winding valleys and draws that cut through the hills. But it was hardly necessary to see the thing to track it. Even if it had not left an overwhelming stench in its wake, the dribs and drabs of necrotic murk cut a clear swath across the land, leaving a trail of dead plants, scorched soil, and at one stream crossing even a bloated trout floating in an eddy of brown water.

Just ahead, the tiger heard a huge crash, as if half of one of the ancient hills had given way. Rounding a bank, he saw the rot angel half-buried beneath a tumult of boulders and logs—a deadfall trap. One entire side was pinned under the

fall, and the tiger saw that its wings had the power of movement after all, for the thing was wildly flapping the one that was free, scrabbling at the deadfall with the claws of both hand and foot, and emitting an unholy, high-pitched screech.

The two halfling hunters the tiger had seen before were leaping and wheeling on either side of the draw, darting beneath the distracted angel's swinging claws to score vicious stabs with the silver blades of their short swords. As one withdrew before the angel's frantic swings, the other jumped forward in a perfectly timed duet of sword play.

The wounds they left could barely be discerned on the angel's dripping torso and limbs, and each alone would have hardly been noticeable to the creature. Taken all together though, the blows from the sparkling swords would surely begin to tell soon.

Which would rob Jaeg of his prey, Selina of her vengeance, and Malar of his sacrifice.

The tiger's warning cry joined the rot angel's wail, both echoing eerily off the hillsides. The halflings, clearly adept warriors, did not let their guards down, but instead drew off,

taking a back-to-back stance with short swords upright in firm two-handed grips, points circling.

Whether they shared some magical telepathic bond or simply instinctively anticipated each other's moves, the tiger could not tell. Even with the reek of the rot angel dulling his nose, the tiger sensed that the scents of the halflings were as alike as their appearances. Perhaps that explained how smoothly the two acted as one.

Without a word, one of the halfling women bent forward at the waist, and the other immediately clambered up on her shoulders. Before the tiger could close on them, the climbing hin had stepped over onto a narrow ledge he hadn't seen, and from this high ground began launching darts at him.

The tiger roared in anger and dodged. Most of the darts flew wide, but one grazed painfully across the top of his skull, opening a shallow cut that bled copiously into the great cat's eyes. Blinking through the red haze, the tiger saw that the dart-wielding halfling had reached down and given her sister a hand up, and now both warriors were pulling more of the hateful darts from pouches at their belts.

But they had underestimated the reach of the tiger's leap. Up he went, claws raking just inches short of one halflings legs before he fell back from the ledge.

Again, the halflings' actions were smooth and quick, as if they had planned for this very eventuality. They ran lightly along the sloping ledge, away from tiger and angel both, to a point where an overhang of the opposite hillside leaned close. Without even a glance backward at either of their opponents, the women leaped across the intervening space, and disappeared from view.

The tiger growled, staring at the hilltop. There was no response. All was quiet in the narrow hollow.

Which meant that the rot angel had ceased its attempts at escape. The tiger whirled, anticipating an attack that did not come.

The hideous creature siarcd at him. It had ceased the frantic attempts to free itself, and now simply lay at an awkward angle against the rubble. The never ceasing flow of black

liquid had slowed, but a thin stream of the stuff still dripped from its one visible foot.

The rot angel turned glowing red eyes to the hilltop, then back to the tiger. Its chest began to contract and expand and it made a rasping noise, and the tiger stepped backward, mindful of the creature's ability to cough up wads of acrid filth. But then it stopped and returned to its efforts—now much more methodical—to free itself. The tiger realized the creature had been laughing at him.

The tiger blinked more blood from its eyes and settled onto its stomach, considering its prey. Even pinned, it possessed deadly weapons and unholy energy. The tiger would probably survive a direct assault, at least enough to finish the beast off, but the dimly heard voice of the part of him that was Jacg insisted that mustn't be done. The hunt was between predator and prey—it was the winnowing of the weak. It would be an insult to the Lord of Beasts to kill the rot angel while it was so held.

Letting another warning growl out through bared teeth, the tiger cautiously approached the rot angel. The monster ceased its fruitless work and stared at the tiger.

The halflings' deadfall was topped by a huge fallen limb from one of the great shadowtop trees that stood, like titans among pixies, at the center of some of the pine groves that dotted the hills. The deadwood was cleverly positioned so that its weight acted as a keystone for all the rubble below, but for all that, the limb was precariously balanced.

With a single bound, the tiger cleared the deadfall and landed on top of the branch. He felt it shifting beneath his weight as soon as he landed, and leaned heavily into the

direction of the shift. A few pebbles rolled away, then some larger stones. Then.

with a great riot of noise and dust, the whole pile shifted and slumped downhill. The tiger leaped away from the fall, landing easily at the precise spot he had jumped up from a heartbeat before, and turned to see what had resulted.

And screamed as claws raked the length of his right side. The ploy had freed the rot angel, which now hovered above the prone tiger, a globe of corruption forming in its hand. The limbs that had been trapped beneath the rubble, its left arm, leg, and wing, were even more twisted and malformed than before, but clearly still functional. The angel flung the globe at the tiger, and the necrotic ichor splashed over the hunting beast's side, flowing into the wound that had just been opened by the wicked claws.

The tiger howled and twisted, stretching its neck in a desperate attempt to catch the foul monster's legs in his jaws, but the angel simply floated higher. The creature did not press its advantage though, but again simply waited, staring.

When the tiger managed to stagger to its feet, the rotting angel had managed to fly over the remains of the deadfall.

And the hunt was on again.

By nightfall, pain, exhaustion, and anger had combined to very nearly drive the tiger mad. His great voice had been reduced to a pathetic rasp. Again and again he had come close to his felled prey, and again and again, the rot angel had seemed to toy with him, allowing the cat to close nearly within striking distance before floating out of reach again.

With the rising of the full moon, everything changed.

The tiger was trotting across a hilltop, occasionally lifting his heavy head to see that the rot angel was still a bowshot ahead, clearly visible in the moonlight. The thing's spoor had burned away the tiger's sense of smell over the course of the long day; no other scent could penetrate his awareness. So he was not aware

that the halflings had returned until after they caught the angel's attention. For this trap, they had used bait. Bait the tiger dimly recognized.

A dappled black horse from the plains was hobbled to a stake at the center of a circle of standing stones. The stones were shot with veins of blue quartz that reflected the moonlight, but it was not this magic that caused the buzzing in the tiger's ears. Something was speaking to him, pleading with him.

The tiger shook his head, returning all of his focus to his prey. The angel was clearly interested in the horse, and altered its wavering course to come near it. It seemed cautious of the blue light cast by the stone circle, but nevertheless leaned forward, reaching out with its long claws toward the shivering horse's flanks.

A halfling stepped silently from behind one of the stones, leaned forward, and cut the rope that hobbled the horse with a swift stroke of her short sword. Her sister appeared from behind the opposite stone in the circle, swinging the flat of her blade against the horse's flanks and letting out a wordless cry. The horse instantly burst from the circle at a full gallop, fleeing the probing claws of the rot angel.

The priest inside the tiger recognized the sisters' plan. This circle must be some holy place. Perhaps they were even worshipers of the goddess who gave the moon its name, and

so the waxing night itself was a holy time to them. Whatever the details, they were clearly seeking divine aid to make a final stand against the unholy creature, this undead monster that had boiled out of the dark places below their homeland and brought death to their people.

But he could not let them steal his sacrifice in the name of another god.

Summoning reserves of strength and rage from deep within himself, the tiger roared, determined to drive off his rivals once

more. It [he halflings slew the rot angel, (hen Malar would be denied his sacrifice, and Malar would not be denied.

As it reading (he tiger's thoughts, (he ro(angel began a slow, circling rise up in the air. I(cas(i(s red gaze back at the tiger, and again made its terrible mockery of laugh. The black ichor ih.u flowed from it sizzled and disappeared before it struck the ground inside the circle, but its attention was not below it. Instead of engaging the halflings. who calmly threw dart after silvered dart into its chest and legs, instead of returning to tease the tiger into rejoining the endless chase, the monster pursued what had drawn it to the circle in the first place. With a burst of unexpected speed, it moved toward□

Koza'. Jacg's slumbering consciousness took sudden possession of the tiger's form. He finally recognized the buzzing that had annoyed the tiger as the horse's panicked entreaties.

7<;i(;! called the horse, .is she ran and bucked and kicked in wild flight from the rot angel.

Jaeg forced his exhausted (igcr form beyond irs limi(s, s(rcaking across (he hill to (he gully where (he angel had cornered the horse.

Only to arrive and find he had been beaten again.

The halflings had surprisingly left the security of their holy ground and interposed themselves between (he angel and Koza. They were willing ro use her as bait, Jaeg realized, but they were not willing to sacrifice an innocent creature.

As the twins drew their swords, a shadow passed over Selune's face, clouds rushing in from the sea. As they faced the rot angel once more, under darkening skies, the rains returned with a fury.

A huge peal of thunder rolled across the Hills of the Dead Kings, but the tremendous noise did not drown out Jaeg's ferocious battle roar. The angel heard the tiger and dropped to the ground, holding the halflings at bay with one outstretched hand as Jaeg flew through the space his enemy had just vacated.

The claws of the angel's right hand stabbed, seeking to open the tiger's belly, but Jaeg had leaped too high, too fast for his prey.

The halflings took advantage of the angel's grounded position to rush in and hack at its legs and wingtips. The thing screamed and whirled back to the pair, striking.) terrible backhanded blow that sent of one of them tumbling through the air.

Jacg landed on one of the crumbling slopes of the gully that contained the battle and wasted no time in jumping again, heading straight for the angel's exposed back. The tiger dug the maimed claws of its left forefoot into one black shoulder,

while the other tore open a huge rent in the monster's right wing.

But even facing away from its attacker, the rot angel was a deadly fighter. Quick as thought, it kicked back with one leg, and a dripping spine at its heel stabbed deep into the tiger's right shoulder.

Jaeg, called Koza again. The battle-trained horse rushed back on the scene, landing vicious kicks of her own into the angel's side. Jaeg fell back, fighting to breathe as blood filled his tiger's mouth.

He did not need breath for the telepathic shout he sent to his mount. Flee. Koza!

The horse obeyed instantly, galloping to the mouth of the gully, calling for Jaeg to join her.

But the sounds of fighting drew the tiger's attention away from Koza.

The angel now faced a single opponent, the halfling warrior with the long braid. Even the tiger's eyes were hard pressed to follow her movements, spinning and leaping in the rain, kicking and stabbing, drawing the angel farther up the gully.

Away from her sister, Jaeg thought, and when he turned to see where the other halfling had landed he found the tip of a blade at his throat.

The injured halfling spoke in the trade tongue, her accent musical compared to the harsh tones Jaeg's people used on those rare occasions they were forced to speak that language. "Shapeshifter. You defended the undead before, then stalked it all day. Whose side are you on?"

Jaeg could not answer her even if he had chosen to, for he realized that he did not truly know the answer to her question. In any case, she did not wait for a response, because her sister called out to her in the fluting language of the halflings.

The battered woman instantly lowered her blade and wheeled, producing a brace of the silvered darts and flinging them up the gully with a single, one-handed throw. No sooner had they left her hand than she charged after them.

Jaeg felt a coldness spreading through his chest from the wound the angel had given him. He ignored it, but when he went to follow the halfling, his left foreleg gave out, sending him sprawling.

The tiger realized it would not finish this hunt.

So the hunter became a man.

“Lord of Beasts,” said Jaeg, finding himself facedown in the mud. “Lend me strength.”

He did not sense any response from his god, and for the first time in an entire life of service to Malar, Jaeg found that his patron’s will was easier to know when he walked on four legs than when he walked on two.

Two legs are all I have left, Jaeg thought, pushing himself up. The angel’s stab to his chest had translated into a weeping black wound in his left breast. The skin of his shoulder and arm hung slack and gray, and the hand that had been wounded before again hung lifeless.

With his good hand, he drew the flensing knife he had used what seemed like an eternity before to make an altar of a boar’s carcass. As a point of honor among the priests of

Malar, Jacg shunned weapons forged for human hands. The paltry tool he

used for butchering his sacrifices was all he had left to fight the rot angel.

Ahead, the battle cries of the halflings suddenly died. Looking up, Jaeg saw that the rot angel had finally gotten the better of the pair. The halflings hung suspended above the ground just as their opponent did, but it was not the magic of the undead that caused their flight, but its terrible strength. The rot angel held each of the halflings by the throat, its long black fingers completely encircling their necks.

Even dying, the sisters fought on. They had lost their weapons, but scratched at the angel's forearms and kicked at its chest again and again in desperate silence.

Jaeg threw the flensing knife at the monster's back. It bounced off harmlessly, not even attracting the angel's attention. Where it hit the ground, the ringing of metal on metal echoed out.

Stuck in mud below the angel, coated in the necrotic filth that flowed off the thing as copiously as the rain falling from the autumn skies, was one of the silver swords the halflings had wielded against the undead monster. A weapon forbidden by the tenets of Jaeg's faith.

Jaeg limped up the gully and stuck his hand unhesitantly into the curtain of ooze pouring over the sword. He drew it forth.

Jaeg did not know how to wield a sword, but the blades of the halflings were light and straight, like a knife. He turned it over in his hand and eyed the rotting angel.

“Malar, Lord of the Beasts,” he prayed.

At the sound of his voice, the angel slowly rotated, alien red eyes staring into Jacg’s. It dropped the limp forms of the halfling twins on either side of the hunter.

Jaeg heard Koza’s panicked neigh from the mouth of the gully. Heard her hooves beating a gallop toward him.

“Here is a sacrifice,” he said, and he plunged the silvered blade

into the creature’s chest just as it brought both its taloned claws swooping in to pierce his ribcage.

The angel coughed, spraying filth over Jaeg as it died, but the hunter was beyond caring. He fell backward, and it seemed to him that he took a long time to fall.

The cold spread throughout his body.

Above, he saw floating faces. Koza blowing and screaming. The halflings leaning against each other.

The one who had spoken to him before leaned down. He could see that the flesh of her throat was gray and dead. She opened her mouth, but no noise issued forth.

He knew that she wanted to ask him what had happened, but had no voice to ask with.

Which was just as well, for Jaeg did not have an answer.

A Prayer for Brother Robert

Philip Athans

dagger falls

17Nightal, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

The girl's scream tore the cold night air like a knife through canvas. Her mother's eyes opened before she was fully awake. She'd heard her daughter scream before, but never like that. It was a scream of sheer terror and the sound rippled through the woman's body, freezing the blood in her veins. She tried to call out to her daughter, but the sound caught in her throat and she choked instead. Still, she was out into the dark corridor before the child screamed again.

The rough wood, so long left unpolished, scraped at her bare feet, but her feet were so cold it registered only as discomfort, not pain. She looked both ways, trying to follow the fading echoes of the last scream, but the darkness was nearly impenetrable. She hadn't thought to light a candle—hadn't thought at all—and only a few steps from the door of her bedchamber she was lost in her own house.

When the next scream came—with the substance of a word, a tortured, shrill form oC'Momma...."—the woman screamed back, but was still unable to form her own daughter's name.

She ran a few more steps, bouncing painfully off a wood-paneled wall, before she finally awoke enough to think through her panic.

“Where am I?” she whispered to herself, then called, “Lillia!”

When her daughter didn't answer, the panic welled up anew. She screamed her daughter's name again, blinking and waving her hands in a futile attempt to fend off the darkness of the wide, chill corridor.

Her hand came to rest on the cold iron of a wall sconce—a sconce that hadn't held a candle in months at least, but it helped her get her bearings. She remembered: the sconces had only been set on one side of the corridor. Both aided and hindered by the sound of another scream, one that ended in a whimper, she turned and ran for her daughter's room.

"Lillia!" she called again as her hand found the doorjamb outside her daughter's room, which was only next door to hers after all. "Momma's here, baby. Momma's—"

Dim light from the dying embers of her daughter's hearth revealed a scene that made her shriek in abject terror. The scream hurt her throat, burned her lungs, and darkened her eyesight. She blinked, and try as she might, could only exhale—but she knew she couldn't faint. She knew she had to go into that room, had to take her daughter up in her arms and get her out of there, despite what she saw.

But her body wouldn't move, her mind wouldn't think, and her heart wouldn't beat.

Lillia looked up at her, only one eye left uncovered, and in that one eye, her mother saw everything she needed to gather the fleeting strength necessary to save her daughter from the dusty old bedroom that somehow had coughed up a ragged little corner of the unholy Abyss itself.

"I've seen Sister Kalia treat mortal wounds with less care," Sister Miranda said, ending with a spirited giggle that made Brother Robert blush.

Brother Robert stopped what he was doing to look up at her—a true butcher never took his eyes from a knife when he was cutting meat—and felt his face twitch into something like a smile. "Well," he said, pausing to clear his throat when

his voice cracked. "Well, any job worth doing ... and all that."

Sister Miranda shrugged and continued chopping onions.

Brother Robert smiled again and went back to trimming the fat from a salted loin of pork.

"You're cutting off the best parts," Sister Miranda chided him. "All the flavor's in the fat."

"All the poisons, too," Brother Robert said, knowing she wouldn't believe him. "Pork fat introduces impure humors that can bring on heartstop."

Sister Miranda laughed at him, as he expected she would, but he went on with what he was doing, and so did she. It was their turn to prepare morningfeast, a chore Brother Robert always looked forward to. It was a simple task, with an easily interpreted outcome. If the other clerics came back for seconds, he'd done it right. Not all of his studies at the temple were so clear cut.

"Praise Amaunator," he whispered when the sun finally sent an errant ray through the leaded glass window of the kitchen. Every morning, the Keeper of the Yellow Sun, their patron deity, lit the world with his grace, and aside from the temple proper, Brother Robert knew no better place to see the first rays of the blessed sun than through the kitchen window.

"Where'd you learn to do that, anyway?" Sister Miranda asked.

He stopped cutting and looked up at her again. When the sunlight touched her soft auburn hair Brother Robert

couldn't help but think Amaunator had graced her with a halo. Her skin

seemed as soft as her hair, and almost the same color, but Brother Robert had to imagine that—of course he'd never touched her, or she him. They were acolytes of the House of the Keeper, the temple of Amaunator in Dagger Falls, and on most days at least, they were friends—rivals sometimes, but mostly friends.

"My father is a butcher," he said, though he was sure he'd told her that before.

"Thank the Keeper for second sons," Sister Kalia broke in, startling both of the young disciples. Brother Robert's knife slipped a fraction of an inch and he apologized under his breath. "The pork and I forgive you. Brother Robert," Sister Kalia said with a smile. "Salt pork and eggs?"

"Yes, Sister," Brother Robert and Sister Miranda said in unison.

"You can share my portion," the older priestess said. "I've an early audience with the lady constable."

Disappointed, Brother Robert looked up at her and nodded. Sister Kalia, an imposing blonde figure in her ceremonial silver armor and flowing cape of yellow and rose, smiled back at him.

"We can save some for you. Sister," he offered, but Sister Kalia had already opened the door.

She paused only long enough to say, "Don't bother. You know how the lady constable can be." Then she was gone.

Brother Robert glanced over at Sister Miranda, who shrugged and went back to her onions.

He didn't "know how the lady constable could be." He'd heard her speak from the balcony of Constable's Tower. Everyone who lived in Dagger Falls had. And he'd seen her at the temple, but only a handful of times. The lady constable, granddaughter of the legendary Randal Morn himself, rarely left Constable's Tower anymore, where it was said she conferred with the castle's ghosts as often as her living advisors.

"Maybe chis time, an exorcism," Sister Miranda said as though reading his thoughts.

Brother Robert shook his head without looking up from his work, which was almost done.

"Scared?" Sister Miranda chided as she scraped the chopped onions from the cutting board to a bowl.

Brother Robert blushed again, sighed, and started to clean up his scraps.

"What did Sister Kalia mean about second sons?" Sister Miranda asked.

"I have an older brother." Brother Robert explained.

"I see," she replied, starting to wash her hands at the basin under the window. "He'll inherit the family butcher shop, so it's off to the temple for number two."

"My mother was a devout lay follower of the Keeper of the Yellow Sun," he said, regretting bringing it up. He didn't like to talk about his mother, though he'd never met her. She had died in childbirth, the newborn Robert barely surviving

himself. "Sometimes I think my father gave me up as an offering."

"Who's that?" Sister Miranda asked.

"My father," Brother Robert explained, puzzled. "When my mother died I think he felt obliged to"

"No," she cut him off. "That woman. A woman just ran into the temple."

Brother Robert knew the world was a strange place, full of magic and wonder, and dangers so arcane the mere thought of them was enough to kill. It was the world he'd grown up in, though safe behind the walls of Dagger Falls.

Still, he had trouble believing the story the woman told them that morning. When she was finished, Brother Robert wanted to excuse himself. He wanted to go somewhere quiet, under the

vigilant sun, and pray that she was mad, that what she described, and her paralyzed-with-fear daughter corroborated with every sidelong glance and whimpering sob, did not happen in a house only a few blocks away.

"One of us should" Sister Miranda started in a whisper.

"Go fetch Sister Kalia," Brother Robert finished for her, a little too loudly, and far too hopefully.

Sister Miranda opened her mouth to answer but paused, thinking that idea over, and Brother Robert swallowed in a dry throat.

"No," Sister Miranda answered, whispering again, after she'd looked once more into the terrified mother's eyes. "I'm not

stupid enough to disturb the senior sister at Constable's Tower."

"Neither am I." Brother Robert whispered back. He too glanced at the ragged, exhausted woman who sat, still in her bedclothes, cradling her daughter on a marble bench near the open temple entrance. Though it was cold outside, only a tenday and a half into the Year of the Ageless One, the interior of the temple, with its single lofty chamber lit by reflected sunlight, was as warm as a summer's day. Still, Brother Robert shivered when he looked at her. He motioned for Sister Miranda to step deeper into an alcove and whispered, "She left us in charge of the temple, but surely this ..."

He wasn't sure how to finish, so he didn't, but judging by the look on Sister Miranda's face, his halfhearted and half-finished plea had the opposite effect on her than he'd planned.

"Sister Kalia left us in charge because she's confident we can handle the spiritual life of Dagger Falls in her absence," she whispered.

"Are you kidding me?" he said, his voice echoing up along the high arches of the ceiling. He cleared his throat when Sister Miranda looked at him as though she was about to gut him like a fish, then whispered back, "A little advice, maybe, sure, or a

healing word to an injured craftsman, fine, but this is ... this seems a little ... above our ... level."

Sister Miranda sighed, apparently not prepared to argue that point. Instead she said, "It's probably nothing. A trick of the light. She said she'd only recently moved there, and that it's

a creaky old house that's been vacant for some time. It could as easily be nothing as ... something.

"I'll go back with her and"

"I'll go ... ?" Brother Robert interrupted, confusing them both with his inflection. Sister Miranda squinted at him, waiting for him to elaborate. "Someone has to stay here with the little girl. I'm not good with children."

He had a feeling she was going to tell him he wasn't good with anyone, which was certainly how he felt, but though it looked for an instant as though she was about to say just that, her face softened and she whispered, "Fine. I'll stay here with the girl."

Though she obviously had more to say, Brother Robert broke in, "But you have to tell Sister Kalia where I've gone the instant she gets back. I mean" he cleared his throat when his voice broke on the word, "mean," and went on "I mean it. The very exact fraction of an instant you first set eyes upon her."

Sister Miranda smiled at him and said, "I promise."

He believed her, but Brother Robert still didn't want to go.

"Mind your step there," Brother Robert said, looking at the woman's feet, not her eyes. She had almost stepped in a puddle covered by a parchment-thin layer of ice.

"Thank you," the woman replied. Her voice was hoarse from crying, maybe from screaming, but still it had a pleasant lilt to it. "And please thank the sister for me too. I never thought to thank her for the salt pork and eggs, or the shoes. It was very kind of her."

“We couldn’t have you walking barefoot through the snow again,” he said, still looking at her feet. “I trust you’re warm enough.”

He could see her nod to him out of the corner of his eye. She hesitated, and he glanced back at her. She was looking down at the gravel street, which was covered in patches of snow that glistened in the morning sun. Brother Robert held back a sigh of relief.

“If you’d rather... ?” he started, knowing he sounded a bit too hopeful.

“No,” she barked, looking up at him in a way that made Brother Robert take a step away from her. A few of the townsfolk passing on the street looked at them with curiosity. It was still early enough, and cold enough, that foot traffic was at a minimum. Brother Robert took no comfort in that, or in what the woman said next. “I have to go back in there. I have to. You and the sister made me think—did I even see what I thought I saw?” “Please don’t think we meant to question—” “No,” she interrupted him again. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t presume ...”

Brother Robert, hoping to at least delay getting to the house—after all, every hour that passed was an hour closer to Sister Kalia’s return from Constable’s Tower—said, “You told us you hadn’t been there long. I’ll admit I don’t recognize you. Are you ... ?”

He let that hang and she looked up, but not at him, and answered, “It’s my grandfather’s house.”

She stared across the rooftops of Dagger Falls. The street they walked took them up a gradual incline, west from the temple toward Constable’s Tower.

The streets of Dagger Falls were irregular, never had been paved, and meandered up and down hills sometimes so steep it pained Brother Robert's calves to walk them. From where they stood, the north wall to their right, looking west uphill to

Constable's Tower, they were high enough up to see the waterfall that gave the town its name, thundering through an icy trough just outside the south wall.

"Your grandfather ..." Brother Robert prompted when it seemed the woman had gone missing in her own memory.

"He died," she said. "Six months ago. In his sleep."

"I'm sorry," Brother Robert said, trying in vain to remember a funeral service that might have fit a man of the appropriate age.

"I didn't know him," the woman said. "I was born here, in the town proper, but my father was murdered by bandits when I was only four, and my mother took us away to Harrowdale?" She looked up at him, and Brother Robert, startled, nodded. He knew of the place, though he'd never been there, in the Dales to the east. "My mother's cousins had a farmstead there, but they lost it, in time, to debt, so we moved into town—into New Velar. We spent as much time in the streets as in a house, and I wanted more for Lillia. Even though my mother never had a kind word for my father, or his family, when word came to us that the house was empty, waiting for us here, I couldn't deny my daughter ... a chance?"

"Every new dawn," Brother Robert recited, "is a new beginning."

The woman smiled at him, though it seemed to pain her to do so, and he blushed once again.

"I should apologize for not asking your name, good priest," she said.

"Brother Robert," he told her.

"Jillea," she replied.

She was beautiful. He hadn't let himself notice before, but in the sunlight, wrapped in a borrowed weatherdoak, her chestnut brown hair a mess, dark circles under eyes still red from crying, he thought she might be the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"We should continue," he said, in order to interrupt his own musings. Still looking at the ground in front of her, she nodded and he continued on.

Brother Robert had walked up the hill for another few yards before he realized he wasn't precisely certain where he was going. He stopped and turned to Jillea to ask her to lead the way, but she had stopped.

Jillea had turned to her right and she stared up at a house with a look of such blanched horror, Brother Robert choked. The word "No" repeated itself over and over again in his head, but when he spoke, he told her, "I know that house."

Everyone in Dagger Falls did. Next to Constable's Tower it was widely held to be the most haunted house in Dagger Falls. Brother Robert had lived in Dagger Falls all his life and never met a single soul who'd ever set foot past its threshold.

"When did you say your grandfather died?" he asked Jillea. "I've never known someone to have lived there."

“Since ... ?” she asked.

“All my life.”

They both stood there for a while, mesmerized by the house’s grim facade. It was enormous, bigger by three or four times than the house Brother Robert shared with Sister Kalia, Sister Miranda, and the Brothers Cedric and Pator. Looking up at the black-and-gray, warped wood siding and the black glass windows that revealed nothing of the manse’s purportedly labyrinthine interior, Brother Robert couldn’t help feeling a pang of jealousy. Brother Cedric had been sent to Ashabenford on an errand for Sister Kalia, and Brother Pator accompanied a patrol of watchmen out into the foothills to root out a nest of owlbcars. At first he’d been happy not to have to camp out in the dangerous, monster-infested wilderness in the middle of the coldest winter in recent memory. But that was then.

“People talk about it?” Jillea asked him. “They tell stories, I mean. About my grandfather’s house?”

He took a breath to tell her it was haunted, but stopped himself. There was no use in scaring her any further, nor could he reliably tell her anything but tales that would amount to little else but the gossip of scatterlings and tavern rats.

“Perhaps,” he said, making it up as he went, “we should hear some of those stories, before we go in. Someone may have heard something, may know something, that will help us get to the heart of the matter. Your grandfather surely had friends, or associates in town.”

Though in a strict moral sense he wasn’t lying. Brother Robert’s heart sank. It felt like the biggest lie ever told. He was just as terrified of going into the Northwail Deathhouse

as he was of telling Jillea that that's what the folk of Dagger Falls called the place she'd brought her daughter to live.

The stench of pipeweed was so thick in the air, Brother Robert held a hand over his mouth and nose, until he saw some of the men looking at him, laughing, and one of them winked at him. He took his hand away, coughed—he couldn't help it—and made his way to the long bar at the back of the room as fast as he could, Jillea in tow.

The ceiling was so low. Brother Robert was afraid he'd bump his head on the warped rafters, though he wasn't remarkably tall. And anyway he was just as worried that the ceiling itself would collapse on top of them.

He stopped at the bar, and felt Jillea's hand on his arm. His flesh tingled when she touched him and though he was still cold from the long walk from Fall's Mist, sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Are you certain this is the place?" Jillea asked him, raising her voice to be heard over the general din of the dozens of people all talking at the same time.

"The man from Fall's Mist sent us here," Brother Robert said with a shrug.

"Welcome to the Slurping Stirge, ladies," a gruff tavernkeeper slurred at them, and it took a heartbeat or two for Brother Robert to catch on that the man thought he was a woman. When he turned to look at the squat, bald, sweaty, dirty, awful little man whose stink followed close on the heels of his words, Brother Robert realized that the man hadn't made a mistake but a joke. Brother Robert didn't laugh.

“I am Brother Robert of the House of the Keeper,” he said, trying to arch one eyebrow the way Sister Kalia did when she wanted to scare the pants off someone, but Brother Robert couldn’t make one of his eyebrows move on its own, so he just ended up looking surprised. The man grinned at him, and Brother Robert noticed that both of the tavernkeeper’s teeth were dark brown. The young priest cleared his throat and continued, “We were told by the master of Fall’s Mist that you knew the man who lived in the Northwall D□”

His voice squeaked and he sort of skidded to a stop before calling Jillea’s house the Northwall Deathhouse right in front of her. He motioned for the innkeeper to lean forward, and the rancid man was uncomfortably eager to comply. Brother Robert did his best to hide the fact that he gagged, though in truth he owed the man an insult.

“The Northwall Deathhouse,” the priest whispered at the man.

The innkeeper stepped back, dramatically feigning shock, and bellowed out, “Three score apologies, Your Holiness, but sounded as if you just asked if I knew who lived in the Northwall Godsbedamned Deathhouse!”

“The ... what?” Jillea asked as Brothet Robert cringed and gritted his teeth.

“No clue whatsoanyway, Brother-boy,” the fat man blustered.

“But you can ask Three-feet over there. He used to know the bloke, or so he says.”

“Brother Robert ... ?” Jillea started to ask.

“Thankyou, good sir,” Brorher Robert said to the innkeeper, and followed the smelly old man’s grubby finger to an even older, even grubbier man who sat slumped over a table close to the halfhearted fire. “May the Keeper shine down on you.”

When the man laughed at him, Brother Robert regretted the blessing, then reminded himself that he should never regret wishing the grace of Amaunator to someone who needed it as badly as the keeper or the Slurping Stirge surely did.

“I liked the other place much better,” Jillea said as she followed him to the hearthside.

“Me too,” Brother Robert agreed, his voice cracking again. He cleared his throat and hoped she hadn’t heard over the continuous din of the low tavern.

The better folk of Dagger Falls took their leisure at Fall’s Mist, in view of the falls, with a glass of fine elven wine. Brother Robert grew up being told almost daily never to set foot in the Slurping Stirge for fear of lice, fleas, and mental infirmity. It was good advice.

“Don’ even,” the old man next to the fire grumbled. “I ainit got n’gold, and me soul’s long since spoked fer.”

“Please, my good man,” Brother Robert said, putting on his best mien of wisdom and grace ... at least, considering his surroundings. “I am here on holy business. I seek no gold, and perhaps your soul will benefit from□”

“Oh, come n’son,” the old man grumbled. “If yer buyin’ ale I’ll listen t’yer serminizations, and we’ll let m’soul find its own drink.”

“May we?” Brother Robert asked, motioning at the two low stools that seemed to have been deliberately set there for them. “If y’gots an arse, use it,” the man growled, then eyed Jillea

strangely through his rheumy yellow orbs. “Don’ suppose yer name’s Teetsie.”

“I should think not.” Brother Robert said, a chill running down his spine. He had the sudden desire to stand up, but kept his seat. “Please direct your attention to me, if you would be so kind.”

The old man leveled a grin at Jillea that made both Brother Robert and the woman uncomfortable—Brother Robert thought there were probably women as far as Waterdeep who were uncomfortable just then and wondered why. “No worries, lass. That was years gone, but I swear yer the spittin’ of a gal in Ordulin I once look up the—”

“My good man!” Brother Robert stopped him. “I beg you, remember yourself.”

The old man laughed, showing two fewer teeth than the innkeeper, and Brother Robert thought it best to press on. He didn’t understand why, but caught sight of Jillea smiling back at the old leech.

“You’re Thrcc-fcet,” Brother Robert pressed on.

The man nodded and said, “Won’ tell y’how I came upon that moniker wid the lady present. You’ll jus’ yell at me agin.”

Jillea laughed and sweat started to pour from Brother Robert’s forehead, underarms, and other places. He fought back the urge to get up and run away screaming.

Instead, he cleared his throat and said, "I understand you once knew a man from Northwall by the name of..."

"Vathriss Koll," Jillea provided.

The name wiped the leer from Three-feet's face, and a dark suspicion further clouded his dull eyes. "Was a pup like you wanna go diggin' up that old slab o' bad comp'ny?"

"You knew him, then," Brother Robert pressed. When Three-feet nodded but seemed reluctant to continue. Brother Robert pressed, "Please, my good man. I am here on the Keeper's business."

Three-feet swallowed at the invocation of Amaunator, and nodded. He put his hands up on the table where they shook so hard. Brother Robert could hear his fingers drumming the tabletop.

"Old bones, I s'pose," Three-feet said with a sigh. "Nasty bloke." He glanced at Jillea and asked, "Relation o' yers?"

She nodded and that seemed to make the old man sad—however briefly. "Tha's why y'looked familiar. Spittin' image. Good lookin' bloke, anyway. Makes sense enough. Ladies licked 'im."

"Liked," Brother Robert corrected, then blushed when the man shrugged and said, "That too."

Brother Robert glanced at Jillea, who nodded to accept the old man's version of a compliment.

"He is dead, then," Brother Robert asked.

"Long enough ago it's probly a'right to talk about "im."

"How long ago?" Jillea asked.

Brother Robert put a hand out to touch her arm, to ask that she let him speak, but withdrew it. He wanted to hear the answer himself.

"Years, lass," Three-feet replied. "Can' tell y'how many." He pointed to his forehead with the stub of a finger that had long ago been sliced half off. "Time stands still once th'ale pickles the ol' noodle." He gave her a toothless smile, and both Jillea and Brother Robert returned it with smiles of their own. Brother Robert hoped his didn't convey the pity he felt for the old man then. "Years, anyways," the man went on.

"Is there anything you can tell us about him that might shed some light on why his house has such a reputation?" Brother Robert asked. "Had you ever visited him there?"

The old man sucked on his gums a moment then screwed up his courage soon enough and said, "He was a bad man. Sorry t'say it suchlike, lass, you bein' relations an' all that, but he was,

an' everybody back then knew ii. I went 10 his house, yeah, a couple times, but not t'visit. I worked fer the man a time'r two. Saw him threaten a partner o'minc with a cleaver. Never seen a knife that clean, that sharp. He was particular that way□liked blades, had lots o'em, and I mean lots. Kept 'em clean and sharp too. Clean and sharp."

"Knives?" Brother Robert asked. "Like a butcher's tools or a warrior's weapons?"

"Both," the old man said.

"What was his trade, back then?" the young priest asked.

“Trade?” Three-feet replied with a toothless smirk. “That’d be what he’d tell ya. Said he was a merchant, but everybody was sure he was set up in th’ Black Network. ‘Course back then, everybody said everybody was in th’ Black Network and only every other body was. But I think he was, and he’d a killed me fast and with a certain amount of screamin’ on my part if I’d said so back then. Proof enough he was no merchant, yeah?”

“The Black Network?” Brother Robert asked. He’d heard the name before, but couldn’t quite place it. It didn’t sound good. He looked at Jillea. who wouldn’t look back at him.

‘Course,” the old man said, “none btcathin’ today could prove it. And none should, son. None should.”

“Back so soon?” Sister Miranda asked, and Brother Robert could see in her eyes that she suspected the truth. Then she confirmed that by saying, “You didn’t go into the house, did you?”

Brother Robert took a deep breath and motioned the sister into the same shadowy alcove they’d rented to that morning. Jillea sped to her daughter, who sat quietly in the temple’s nave, playing with a little rag doll Sister Miranda must have given her.

“Please tell me Sister Kalia has returned,” Brother Robert whispered.

“She hasn’t,” Sister Miranda replied, impatient, even angry with him. “I promised you I’d□”

“She lives in the Northwall Deathhouse,” Brother Robert whispered back, and Sister Miranda blanched. “I can’t go in there.”

“Yes, you can,” she said, though Brother Robert wanted to think she didn’t really believe it. “You must. And what have you been doing all day?”

“We’ve been ...” he had to pause to find the word, “investigating.”

Sister Miranda sighed at him and crossed her arms.

“She inherited the place from her grandfather, who she said has been dead for six months. But we discovered that he’s been dead for much longer than that,” Brother Robert explained, “and that he used to be a member of something called the Black Network. Do you know what that is? Or was?”

“They’re mercenaries, I think,” she replied, shaking her head. “But what of it?”

“I don’t know. The name just... gives me pause.”

“Brother,” she said with a heavy sigh. “I know you’re frightened. I know you’ve grown up here with all those stories of haunted houses and so on, but you serve a greater purpose and a greater power. We both do. You can go into that house and help this woman and her child because you will not be going there alone. You will be going there with Amaunator himself.”

Brother Robert opened his mouth to protest but snapped his teeth shut.

She was right.

“Well then,” he said, “can I at least put my armor on?”

The life-giving light of Amaunator was closer to the western horizon than the eastern when Brother Robert pushed open the heavy front door of the Northwall Deathhouse. The hinges

screeched out a pained complaint, as though the house itself was telling him to go away, that he wasn't welcome there. But with a glance up over his shoulder to the sun, he pushed the door all the way open and stepped in, reminding himself of Sister Miranda's wisdom, that he walked with Amaunator. At least he hoped so.

The inside of the house was in no better condition than the outside. The smell of dust and mold lingered in the air, seeping into his clothes and settling on his hair. There were fewer cobwebs than he'd expected, and no sign of vermin. The fact that there was no evidence of rats or mice, or even spiders, didn't make him feel any better as he strode the warped, creaking planks of the foyer floor. He didn't want to imagine what would scare all the spiders out of an abandoned house.

He turned to Jillea, who stood very close behind him. Her proximity made him shudder in a way that conflicted with the reasons the house made him shudder, but the paleness of her face and the shaking in her eyes reminded the young acolyte of why he was there, and the fact that the woman looked to him for guidance.

"You said," he started to ask, swallowing when his voice once again failed him. He cleared his throat and started again. "You said the ... disturbance occurred in Lillia's bedchamber."

Jillca nodded, and he could see her swallow back a sob.

"I am afraid too," he told her, and somehow that seemed to steady her.

In front of them stood a grand staircase, the foot of which was as wide as most of the common houses of Dagger Falls. The heavy oaken banister was guarded on either side by carved dragons that gave Brother Robert a brief chill. He tipped his head to the stairs, and Jillca nodded.

Brother Robert cleared his throat one more time, squared his shoulders, and wrapped his left hand around the symbol of

Amaunator—a golden sun—that hung from a chain around his neck. The symbol had been a gift from his mother, and held a divine spark that always gave him comfort. His right hand he placed on the handle of the mace that hung on his belt. The chain mail clinked as he went up the stairs, and he tried to focus on that sound. It comforted him—a little anyway.

At the top of the massive stairs. Brother Robert used a flint and steel to light a candle he'd brought with him from the temple. The waning daylight filtered in through high windows coated with a smoky grime and covered by heavy drapes. Further filtered by the dust in the air, it was as though the house itself resisted Amaunator's greatest blessing. Brother Robert was puzzled and heartened to find that that thought angered him.

He picked a direction and tipped his head—why was he so reluctant to speak?—and was rewarded by a nod from Jillea. Glancing back from time to time to follow her silent instructions they soon came to the door to Lillia's bedchamber. The tall, heavy door was ajar, and Brother Robert drew in a deep breath, tightened his grip on his holy symbol, briefly wished he'd given the candle to Jillea to hold

so his right hand could have drawn his mace, and stepped into the room.

When nothing jumped out at him, when all Nine Hells didn't open up before him, Brother Robert let the breath out in a relieved sigh.

The room was actually quite pleasant, though the light was as dim and dusky as in the rest of the house. He could see Jillea's first efforts to make a home in the dilapidated structure. Wooden toys and rag dolls littered a clean rug she must have brought with her from New Velar. The bed had new linen, though the sheets and blanket had been disturbed, and left to hang to the floor. The fire had burned out completely, leaving the hearth cold and dark.

Brother Robert turned to Jillea and shrugged.

"They were—" Jillea started then stopped herself when her voice echoed in the still space, and Brother Robert jumped. She went pale again and continued in a whisper, pointing to a space on the floor between the hearth and the bed, "They were right there. All over her."

Brother Robert nodded and looked back into the room. There was nothing there. Nothing alive—or undead.

"But it was night," Jillea whispered, and Brother Robert detected a hopeful note in her voice, a hope that sent a tingle down his already tingling spine. "Maybe they only come at night."

Brother Robert sighed and nodded, and thought but didn't say: of course they only come at night, when Amaunator's light is withdrawn from the world of the living.

“Arc you suggesting we wait until sundown?” he asked, knowing full well she did. After she nodded he said, “I suppose that would be possible.”

She forced a smile on her face and said, “I’ve only made up the two rooms.”

Brother Robert feigned an interest in the dry rot on the wood-paneled walls.

The woman’s scream tore the cold night air like a knife through canvas. Brother Robert’s eyes opened before he was even fully awake. He’d never heard someone scream like that before. It was a scream of sheer terror and the sound rippled through the young man’s body, freezing the blood in his veins. He tried to call out to her, but the sound caught in his throat and he choked instead. He was on his feet before the woman screamed again.

It took Brother Robert a heartbeat or so to remember where he was. His hand went to his holy symbol, and a prayer moved to the front of his mind, calming him with the reminder of the god’s grace he held. When she screamed again, he shouted 111 lea’s

name instead of the prayer, all the while hoping the little bit of his god’s grace he carried would be enough.

Over the course of their evening together—one of the most uncomfortable stretches of time the young Brother Robert had ever spent—he’d tried to explore at least the main corridors of the house, though both of them avoided the rooms Jillea had yet to open herself. She and her daughter hardly required the full maze of rooms the house provided, and she never did tell Brother Robert what she intended to do with all that space, or how she could possibly care for the house on her own.

Another scream echoed through the near pitch darkness, and Brother Robert snatched the candle—barely a nub left burning on the dusty table next to the sofa—and he cursed himself for having dozed off. He couldn't imagine how he'd managed to fall asleep, as keyed up as he'd been the night before, uncomfortable both in the strange old house and alone in the company of a beautiful woman.

"Jillea!" he shouted into the darkness as, hands shaking, he lit a fresh candle, dropped the nub, and held the light in his left hand, his mace in his right. "Jillea, where are you?"

They had promised one another not to leave the sitting room off the foyer, near enough to the stairs that they felt they'd hear any commotion in the little girl's room, and near enough the front door should they have to make good their escape. Brother Robert stepped out into the corridor when the scream sounded again, gurgling at the end. The young priest thought it came from behind the stairs—and thought it sounded as if the woman was being ripped apart, eaten alive, boiled, flayed...

He shook his head and ran, three quick steps to a door set in the side of the huge stairway. Another gurgling, whimpering, heart-wrenching scream echoed up from below. He wouldn't let himself think the words "basement," or "cellar," but instead flung the door open and called down the length of the winding

wooden stairs, Jillea's name bounding back and forth from brick wall to brick wall in the claustrophobic space, answered by another tortured wail.

"Jillea!" he called again, and he ran down the stairs. Even as he dropped from step to step he tried to tell himself to slow down, that he was rushing headlong into stygian darkness,

following the screams of a woman who might be being eaten alive by Amaunator could only know what, but his legs, and his heart, wouldn't listen.

When his foot finally went from wooden stair step to flagstone floor, he slid around the corner of the stairway into the dark cellar and skidded to a halt. His heart leaped in his chest, shuddering so hard it actually caused him pain. He tried to breathe in, but choked, sputtered, almost blew out his candle, and his eyes went wide—so wide they, too, hurt.

Jillea was there, on one knee on the rough flagstones, surrounded by old crates, rusted tools—the effluvium of a forgotten basement—and all over her, clawing at her, tearing at her, groping in obscene and violent ways at her, were hands.

“May the Keeper save us all,” Brother Robert choked out, taking a step toward her, but not sure what to do, not even sure just then of his own name.

There were dozens of them, he thought maybe even hundreds. Hands. Disembodied hands. Flesh deathly pale, gray even in the flickering orange candlelight, the things moved with a grotesque life of their own, crawling like hideous spiders, their nails tap-tap-tapping across the flagstones, ripping into Jillea's nightclothes. tangling in her hair. Their wrists showed gruesome black twine, sutures that hid the bone and gristle within. Fingernails, black and long, were broken in some cases, freakishly long, even manicured, in others. Some of the hands had obviously belonged to men, some to women, not all of them human.

Pig's feet, he thought. Like the pig's feet my father—

Jillca screamed out, “Brother—” but was choked off by a ringer obscenely jammed into her open mouth.

Brother Robert could only see one of her eyes, glinting in the candlelight, wide and red and desperate.

Knowing he would be of no use to her blind, he took a moment to set the candle down on an overturned crate then stepped forward—only to hesitate.

Jillea flung one arm out to him and three of the hands fell away from her to squirm on the floor until they regained their “footing.”

Brother Robert drew in a deep breath and grabbed at one of the hands that twisted itself into the woman’s long hair. The flesh was as cold as ice and he recoiled away from it—but it recoiled away from him too.

Jillea spat the cold dead finger from her mouth and gasped, “Help me,” before two more fingers dug into her lips.

Brother Robert grabbed the hand that invaded her mouth and tossed it aside. Heartened by that success he tore at a few more, hurling them into the dark recesses of the cavernous basement. Some clattered against old tools and other unseen items. All of them scuttled right back at them. Brother Robert waved his mace over his head, trying to sort out a way to use it without bashing in the skull of the woman he was trying to save. He had trained with it, but not often, and not well, and he couldn’t trust himself to exhibit the finesse he’d need just then.

Something grabbed his ankle and Brother Robert screamed in a way that shook and embarrassed him. He thought he sounded like a little girl. The blood drained from his face, and his hand tightened around his holy symbol.

Brother Robert closed his eyes, quivering under the hideous sensation of freezing cold claws crawling up his legs,

digging into the flesh of his unprotected thighs. He spoke his god's name, he opened his heart to the Keeper, and he said, "Go away."

Jillea screamed again.

"Away," Brother Robert said. "Away, unclean things. Turn from the light of the word of Amaunator!"

He could feel—something, a feeling? A wave? Energy? Light—but it was still dark as a tomb down there—flowed out of him into the darkness. The hands trembled as the unseen radiance hit them, and they started to fall away from Jillea. The woman took heart, brushing some of them off her, pulling away others. She managed to stand. Some of the dozens of hands scurried off into the darkness; others retreated only a foot or so, but paused, as though thinking.

The very idea of that almost made Brother Robert retch on the spot, but he managed to hold out a hand to Jillea. When her hand touched his he was encouraged by its warmth.

"This way," he told her. "I'm getting you out of here."

Brother Robert didn't wait for her to answer, just pulled her toward the stairs, leaving the candle behind. He stumbled a few times running up the narrow wooden staircase, and so did she. Scraping his knuckles on the rough brick of the close-in walls almost made him drop his mace, but they finally made it to the top and through the door, into darkness—and horror.

Though clouds had rolled in over the evening and the moonless night was dark in that neighborhood of sparse but large homes, they had spent some time before the sun had set opening as many of the heavy drapes as they could, doing their best to allow some light into the cavernous

space. Having left his candle behind, Brother Robert had to blink in near total darkness, but enough light came in from outside that he could see them, hundreds of them. They were everywhere.

Disembodied hands swarmed the door, climbed the drapes, and seemed intent on blocking the light. Freezing sleet pelted the windows, coming down in sheets—and lightning flashed. In that instant he could see them all over the foyer, all over the

walls, hanging there, clattering, tapping, clawing, groping across the floor, leaving ragged scratches in the dry old wood.

Jillea screamed, “We’re trapped!” and pulled on his arm, yanking him toward the stairs. “They’ll drag me down there again.”

He should have run, should have dragged her behind him, taken their chances with the door, but he let her pull him up the stairs. There were fewer of them on the steps, a few scuttling up the banister. Jillea took the lead and there was another flash of lightning, a rumble of distant thunder he hadn’t heard before, and he saw one on her back. He tore it off her and a strip of her nightgown came away with it. Blood oozed from a scratch on the soft, pale skin of her back. It was then he realized she was bleeding, bleeding from a dozen cuts all over her body. Blood soaked in splotches onto the thin fabric of her simple shift—and there was another hand on her shoulder. He tore it off and some of her hair came with it.

That’s how they’ll kill us, he thought, his already cold blood running even colder. One scratch at a time.

They reached the top of the stairs and Jillea pulled him toward the two bedchambers she'd claimed when she'd first taken possession of the house. Brother Robert didn't try to stop her. The two rooms were on outside walls. There would be windows they could open or break, jump from, at least call out of for help. The houses in the Northwall district were far apart and huge—it was possible no one would hear them, but it was worth a try.

Jillea skidded to a stop at the door to her daughter's chamber and Brother Robert almost bowled her over. She screamed so loud he closed his eyes, and as she tumbled backward, clawing at him to try to get past him and back out into the dark corridor. Brother Robert saw the source of her blind panic.

"It's cutting meat," he breathed, even as the image finally n to form in his mind.

Another mass of disembodied hands had gathered in the little girl's bedchamber, clawing all over each other like bees in a hive, fingers grasping at palms, a column of them six feet high, with others hanging on to others to form arms, and the bottom of the mass separated into legs. The cold dead hands had come together to form the shape of a man, a man who, back to the door, slammed its right arm down then raised it up again, all on the action of claws hanging onto claws, so it appeared to be chopping meat, dropping a cleaver down over and over, methodically cutting, butchering.

Father? Brother Robert thought—it then had to choke back bile.

Lightning Hashed in the tall window, and Brother Robert could see the spaces between the hands. Thunder rumbled—

much closer—and the head formed of hands turned toward him.

Jillca grabbed Brother Robert by the shoulder of his chain mail tunic and dragged him, screaming, into the darkness of the corridor.

Brother Robert lit a second candle, let some wax drip onto the floor, and set it on the melted wax to help it stand upright. Jillea lay on the cold, rough wood, on her back, tears streaming from her eyes down her temples and into her matted, wild hair. Her breath came in sharp, ragged gasps that seemed to accompany the incessant scratching at the door.

“You’ll be all right,” Brother Robert whispered to her. Fighting back his own discomfort, he took stock of her injuries. He didn’t bother counting the scratches, there were too many. Instead he concentrated on the ones that bled. His hands shook and he paused, trying to still them before he touched her. Whispering pleas to the Keeper of the Yellow Sun, he touched the worst of them and begged his god to help close them. Amaunator answered.

Her skin was as soft as he imagined it would be, and warmer than he expected—hot, even. He didn’t blush, but didn’t quite breathe normally, either. He saw more of her than modesty would dictate, but the claws had gotten to her almost everywhere, showing no such timidity, so neither could he.

Jillea cried, but with each mention of Amaunator’s name, her breathing slowed a little, until finally she could speak.

“It’s all my fault,” she whispered, rubbing the tears from her eyes with a dirty hand and leaving a gray streak across her forehead.

Brother Robert shushed her and sat back, turning his face to the floor as she slid to a seated position, gathering the tattered remnants of her nightclothes around her. Sister Miranda's weathercloak and shoes were downstairs, in the sitting room. Brother Robert drew off his chain mail tunic. Jillea looked at him with a strange expression and shook her head.

"Forgive me," Brother Robert whispered and took off the roughspun shirt he wore under his armor. Embarrassed that he was momentarily unclothed in front of her, he handed her his shirt, which she accepted with a nod and the briefest flash of a smile. He put the chain mail back on over bare skin and shivered at its chill touch.

"You still don't know the house well," he said, keeping his voice down though they both knew full well that the crawling claws knew they were in there. "You were in a blind panic and so was I. You couldn't know the room had no window."

She put her head in her hands, and tried to no avail to sort out her hair. "No," she said, looking down at the floor. Brother Robert couldn't see her face. "All of it. It's all my fault."

"You couldn't know what evil lurked here," he replied, impatient with her self-recrimination. "You have a child, and you saw an opportunity to"

"I knew," she whispered, and Brother Robert's heart sank. "I knew my grandfather had been dead for more than six months. I knew what people in Dagger Falls said about this wretched house. And I knew what my grandfather served."

"The mercenaries?" he prompted. "The Black Network."

“The Zhentarim.” she whispered. Brother Robert had heard the name before, but couldn’t place it. “Mercenaries now,” she went on, “scattered here and there, powerless in their own right. But not so in my grandfather’s time, in the time before Shade.”

Brother Robert drew in a sharp breath, the old stories coming back to him. He’d never given them much thought before—the Dales were lull of tall tales of daring exploits and suchlike, all from the supposed “good old days,” before the Spellplague, before Abeir. The Zhentarim were a sort of association of bogeymen, blamed for any and every misfortune from the Great Dale to the Sword Coast, however such an idea—a world-spanning organization of evil... what, merchants?—challenged the imagination.

“My grandfather,” she went on, her voice so low he could hardly hear her, though they were separated by only a few feet. Faraway thunder punctuated the scratching of the claws outside, and Brother Robert’s own heartbeat managed to all but hide her words. “My grandfather was a spy for them, here in Dagger Falls, many, many years ago. My mother didn’t know, not when she was just a little girl, but eventually she started to notice the way the townsfolk avoided her family, eventually she questioned how a man who never seemed to work a day in his life could live in such luxury.”

“But still,” he told her, “you were not even born then.”

“But she told me,” Jillea replied, looking up at him with an expression of such pure defeat that he thought his heart would break along with hers. “She warned me. She saw something. She saw him ... cut people. He killed all those people, and he kept their hands. He kept their hands. She

found them, one night□ some of them□and she left. She left and she never came back,

and she told me never to come back. She begged me never to come back, but I did.”

Jillea hung her head between her knees and sobbed.

A tear rolled down Brother Robert’s cheek and he went to his knees, reached out to her□and the doorknob turned.

“The lock will hold,” he whispered when he saw Jillea’s eyes shoot up to the door.

But it didn’t.

Amaunator, Brother Robert silently prayed as he leaped to his feet, please hear me. I need you now.

He was sure they would pour into the empty little room, knock over and snuff out the candles, swarm them, rip them to pieces, but they didn’t□not all at once.

A dozen or so did scurry in, and without thinking really Brother Robert stomped down on one, recoiling at the sound of a sickening series of pops and cracks, but it quivered a little and didn’t move again. He drew out his mace. Jillea screamed. She scurried backward on her feet and palms, and drew herself up against the far corner.

In the doorway stood the man made of crawling hands.

“Blood,” the hideous amalgamation said. Brother Robert turned his face away from it. The voice seemed to boil up from beneath them, and he was sure he felt the wood floor vibrate under his feet with each syllable. “Blood of my blood, you have come.”

“No!” Brother Robert shouted at it, bringing his mace up before him, forcing his eyes to face the thing. But he couldn’t look it in the eyes. It had no eyes, no mouth, just a head made of hands, from which rumbled that ghastly voice.

“Be gone, priest,” it growled at him, somehow taking a step forward and sliding in at the same time, moved along by the working of a hundred twitching dead fingers. “She is mine.”

“No, Vathriss Koll,” Brother Robert said, certain that he addressed the undead spirit of Jillea’s grandfather. He felt a great

warmth spread from his heart and into his limbs, down his arms to his hands, and into the mace. “She came to Amaunator for help. And he has sent me.”

Brother Robert took two steps forward, his mace in both hands, and as he raised the weapon over his head a blinding ray burst forth from its steel head, flooding the room with brilliant light. Jillea screamed again, and Brother Robert had to close his eyes. He brought the mace down blind, and when it smashed into the hands, he felt and heard them splinter under the force of the blow—a blow that overbalanced him and sent him stumbling too far forward.

He opened his eyes and the claws were on him—he counted eight before he stopped counting and staggered backward on shaking legs.

“Jillea!” he shouted.

Jillea gasped and stepped forward, away from the wall.

Brother Robert tore the grasping, raking claws from his chain mail, in at least one case leaving a broken black fingernail behind in the links. He looked up at the form in the doorway;

if it had released any of its hands to claw at him they had been replaced by others. As the light faded from Brother Robert's mace, it was replaced by the glow of a golden disk with a dozen rays extending from it—the symbol of Amaunator—blazing on the swarm of writhing claws as though a portion of it was tattooed in light onto a dozen or more hands. Where that light touched, the hands shivered and went still.

"No," the creature's disembodied voice boomed, "she came to me."

"Grandfather!" Jillea shrieked. "No!"

Brother Robert stomped on two more claws that scuttled up at him. He reached back with one hand for Jillea, who shrank from his touch. Tears poured down her face, though she kept her eyes closed tight.

"She told me not to come," Jillea whimpered. "But you are here," the voice responded. Two more. Brother Robert prayed. Please, Keeper, just two more.

"I'm afraid," Jillea sobbed, and Brother Robert's heart sank.

"I am here," Vathriss Koll said, and hands, dozens and dozens of disembodied hands, poured into the little room from around the creature's "feet."

"So am I," Brother Robert called out. and gathered the will of Amaunator again, even as claws dug deep furrows in his feet through the leather of his shoes.

He screamed and light blasted out through the holy symbol around his neck and slammed into the form of Jillea's long-dead grandfather, a murderer of hundreds, perhaps

thousands, who had eluded the torments of the Maggot Pit of Avcrnus for far too long.

Without a sound, the form of Vathriss Koll simply fell apart. The claws, some still, some quivering, some curling into fists, fell away, coming apart from each other and falling into a pile that buried many of their still-scuttling brothers.

“Grandfather?” Jillea asked with a whimper, stepping forward.

Claws scuttled up her legs and grabbed at her, scratched her again and again. She winced in pain but still stepped forward. The light still shone from Brother Robert’s holy symbol, lighting the ghastly scene as though dawn had come.

“Turn from him, blood of my blood,” the voice called out from all around them. It sounded weaker, farther away, but still it made Brother Robert’s skin crawl.

Jillea stepped forward again and Brother Robert reached out a hand and took her by the elbow. One of the claws dug its nails into her breast and she shuddered and screamed.

Brother Robert swallowed bile and shouted out the name of his god. A thunderbolt of pure radiance leaped from him and crashed into the mass of crawling claws, sending dozens of them

scattering out into the wide corridor. Amazed at the power that the Keeper of the Yellow Sun had placed at his call, Brother Robert tightened his grip on Jillea’s elbow and pulled her forward to the door. They stepped into the mass of claws, some dead, some dying, some still ripping at their flesh.

“Save me, Amaunator,” Jillea whispered, and Brother Robert sent forth another burst of radiant energy.

They stepped forward again, more of the claws dead, but more scuttling at them.

“You were mine,” the voice came one last time, barely a whisper.

“No,” Jillea and Brother Robert said at the same time.

“She was never yours,” the young priest went on. “Your own daughter fled you when she realized who you were, and Jillea’s daughter will never know the shame of having known you.”

Brother Robert’s voice caught in his throat then, but not because he was afraid of the weakening spirit he confronted. He had a spirit of his own haunting him, a father who had cast him out, who blamed him for something that couldn’t be his fault. But a father who could still know of the life he had found in the service of Amaunator, a father he could forgive, a father with whom could still make peace.

Brother Robert looked across the hall, into Lillia’s bedchamber and the window on the far wall.

“Amaunator,” he breathed. The dawn’s light seeped through the heavy drapes, digging through the black soot as though reaching out a hand to them both. Without looking back at Jillea, Brother Robert shouted, “Run!”

And they ran. He put his mace out in front of him and it broke the window, but fell from his hand in midair. Even as they fell Brother Robert didn’t think about how high up they were, how far they had to fall; all he wanted to experience was

the light of the dawn, the grace of his god that bathed them as they fell.

Every bit of the air in his lungs escaped him when they hit the muddy ground in a heap. A pile of snow, a puddle of water, some horse manure, and the guiding hand of Amaunator himself conspired to save them.

There were only a few people on the street, but they gasped and started to come forward to aid the young man and the woman who seemed to explode out of the Northwall Deathhouse—but they stopped and withdrew, gasping at the sight of half a dozen disembodied hands worrying at the torn flesh of them both.

Brother Robert threw some away and smashed them with his bare hands. Jillea bit one, threw another—which a passing teamster stomped to death with a heavy boot. Others came to their aid with staves and parasols, boots and rocks, until all the hands were still.

Jillea threw her arms around Brother Robert and he recoiled—but she wouldn't let him, instead forcing him into an embrace that stole the creeping chill of the morning air.

"Praise Amaunator," he whispered into the softness of her neck.

"Praise Amaunator, indeed," Sister Kalia responded.

Shocked, Brother Robert tried to push Jillea away from him, but she wouldn't budge. He had to content himself with looking up at the wide-eyed cleric with a sheepish blush.

"I suppose you're going to tell me I made it here just a moment too late," Sister Kalia said with a smile.

Jillea started to laugh at that, and though his face was surely as red as the scattering clouds above the rising sun. Brother Robert laughed with her.

The King in Copper

Richard Baker

hulburg

15 Ches, the Year of the Bent Blade (1376 DP)

I have heard," said Lord Hekman Odelmor, "that the old harmachs of Hulburg were buried well indeed, with the trappings and appointments befitting lords of a wealthy city." He leaned back in his great chair and favored Angar Hulmaster with a wide grin. Tall and round-faced, Odelmor—a lord in fact, if not exactly in title—habitually wore a mask of geniality, but his eyes were cold and hard. "Tell me, young Angar, is there anything to that tale?"

The hall of Daggersgard echoed with raucous laughter, shouts for service, and the heavy clinking of goblets and cutlery. Angar Hulmaster's few servants scurried to fill the plates and cups of the Hillsfarian company, despite the fact that the Hulmasters could ill-afford such hospitality. Carefully the dark-haired lord put on a small frown of indifference as he set down the cup and considered his answer. He was a young man with a taciturn, sullen manner to him. Strangers sometimes mistook him for a scholar of some sort, but Angar was an indifferent student. He had no talent for applying himself to things that didn't interest

him, and a strong stubborn streak that surfaced when others tried to bend him to their will. Unfortunately that was exactly what Odelmor and the rest of his fellows had been doing for months now, and Angar had no choice but to bite his tongue and make a show of graciousness if he cared to live from day to day.

Kindon Marstel, sitting on Angar's opposite side, mistook the young lord's reticence for evasion. "Come, Angar, you must know something of your family's old vaults," he said sharply. "What are you trying to hide from us?" Marstel was a lean

old martinet with close-cropped hair of iron gray and a cold, humorless nature. Like Odelmor, Marstel was a former Red Plume captain from the city of Hillsfar. A year ago, the mercenary lords had been obliged to flee Hillsfar when the forces of Zhentil Keep overthrew the Red Plumes and their master Maalthir. Unfortunately both settled on the ruined city of Hulburg—small, distant, and virtually unoccupied except for the Hulmasters and their handful of folk—as a safe place to begin their lives in exile. More Red Plumes had followed, bringing from their estates in Hillsfar whatever treasure, servants, and sellswords they could.

Angar grimaced and offered the least dangerous answer that came to mind. “I am hiding nothing. Lord Marstel,” he said. “The old harmachs are buried in the crypts of Hammerbold Abbey, but I don’t know of any great wealth buried there.” That much at least was true. His family’s poverty had long ago stripped Angar of any useless sentimentality. If he’d known of any valuable trinkets decorating the moldering bones of his distant ancestors, he might have plundered them himself. Now his unwelcome guests would undoubtedly make pillaging burial vaults their next project. Already Red Plume expatriates had dug up half of Hulburg, ferreting out any glint of old treasure remaining in the long-ruined city.

Of course, if I admit that I know of no more buried treasures, Odelmor and Marstel might decide that I have outlived

my usefulness, he reflected glumly. As galling as it was to have his tiny demesne overrun by Odelmor and his fellows and to endure the pretense of hosting the invaders in his own keep, at least Angar hadn’t been killed yet. Hoping that he might deflect the Hillsfarrians for a few days more, he added, “The abbey ruins likely harbor dangerous undead.

King Aesperus claims most such places in Hulburg, as you well know."

"You think to scare us away with that old grue's talc?" Marstcl scoffed.

"It's no empty fright. Two years past the Company of the Black Griffon guested with mc while they searched the crypts beneath the city. I spoke at length with their mage, Irina, about their explorations. I wouldn't dismiss Aesperus - influence, my lord."

"Be that as it may, I am inclined to investigate the matter," Odelmor said. "Our soldiers can deal with a few moldering old skeletons easily enough, and if your King in Copper objects, well, Marstcl and I have competent wizards in our employ. Would you be so good as to show us the abbey ruins in the morning?"

"They aren't hard to find, my lord. The abbey is the great old stone building on the seaward slopes of the Easthead. You can't miss it."

"Oh, I am sure that my men and I won't have any trouble finding the place." Odelmor glanced over at Marstcl, and then fixed his eyes on Angar. "It merely seemed to mc that you might wish to accompany us and pay your respects to your forebears. Or would you prefer to keep your own company?"

A chill ran down Angar's spine, but he managed to keep his expression neutral. It was not a casual request; doubtless Odelmor wanted to make sure that Angar didn't send him into some cursed chamber or ancient trap. "Of course I will be happy to join you. Lord Odelmor, but I do not expect that much remains unspoiled. The city has been sacked several times since the old lords were laid to rest."

Odelmor waved his hand in dismissal. "As you say, but perhaps fortune will favor us anyway. We might as well have a look, hey? I'll send for you tomorrow when we're ready to begin."

Angar inclined his head in assent. He didn't dare to refuse. Somehow in the last few tendays dozens of Red Plume mercenaries had wound up billeting in the empty barracks of Daggersgard. They outnumbered his own ill-equipped retainers three or four to one by now. Even if he somehow found a way to evict the Red Plumes from the keep with his handful of poorly trained Hulmaster soldiers, two hundred more Hillsfarian mercenaries and their families were encamped by Hulburg's harbor. It wouldn't take them long at all to force the door of Daggersgard if he tried to shut it in their faces.

Eventually the banquet—really nothing more than an evening of organized plunder, in which Angar's so-called guests graciously allowed him to put everything in his larder and cellars before them—came to an end, and the mercenary captains and their soldiers took their leave. Angar stood by the door and saw them out, as if Odelmor and Marstel were dear friends. For a moment he hoped that the Hillsfarrians had forgotten about their earlier conversation, but Odelmor paused at the threshold. He leaned close to Angar and gripped the young harmach's arm in one sword-hardened fist. "It would be good if we found something of value soon, Angar," he said in a low voice. "If you have any thoughts of withholding any of the city's old treasures for yourself, you'd be wise to abandon them. Should we come to think that you have nothing more to share with me, well, it would mean that certain changes in our association must follow. I doubt you would wish that to happen."

Angar winced, but he nodded. "I understand."

“Good,” said Odelmor. “Tomorrow morning, then.” He grinned again and followed his soldiers down to the rain-splattered street.

Angar watched him leave, then shut the door behind him. His servants moved slowly through the keep’s cluttered hall, picking up after the Red Plumes as they did every night. The young lord waved them off as they came to report on the pillaging of the keep’s cellars and wearily turned his steps toward his private chambers. He let himself in and went to stand before the small fire that burned in the room’s great stone hearth.

He heard the door to the inner suite open carefully behind him, and the light rustle of robes. “They are gone?” Estine asked.

Angar glanced at his wife. She was a rather plain young woman, whose Thentian family was almost as poor as the Hulmasters; their match had been the best either family could arrange, but he was fond of her, and she was wiser than he. He’d been careful to keep her hidden in his rooms as much as possible for fear that some Red Plume guest might take a fancy to her. “For now,” he answered her. “But Odelmor intends to send for me in the morning. He wants to dig up the Hulmaster vaults beneath the abbey.”

She shuddered in distaste. “Is there anything of value there?”

“I have no idea. But if there is, I’m sure Odelmor and his mercenaries will sniff it out. They’re worse than swine hunting for truffles.”

“Let us hope they don’t find anything,” Estine said. “Once there’s nothing more to unearth, it might be that they’ll grow tired of Hulburg and leave us be.”

"I doubt it." Angar ran his hands through his black hair. "Before he left, Odelmor said that it would go badly with me if he came to think that I had nothing left to give him. I think you know what that means."

Estine frowned. "We just have to keep them convinced of your usefulness as long as possible."

"It might be better if we fled□"

Estine shook her head. "We've discussed that. We have Red Plumes at our elbows from the moment we step out the door."

Angar clenched his fists and stared into the fire. "What else can I do?" he snarled. "What other choice do we have?"

"Wail, and watch. Perhaps you'll find some rich treasure tomorrow, and the Hillsfarrians will fall out with each other when they divide their spoils." Tentatively Estine took his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. "It can't continue like this for much longer."

"No, it can't," Angar said. He sighed, and let her lead him to the bedchamber.

In the morning, Odelmor's soldiers did not appear at the Hulmaster keep until almost noon. Angar was not surprised. The expatriate lords were rapidly losing whatever personal industry and discipline might have once carried them to their high positions. With little to do and no one to please other than themselves, they had fallen into the habit of keeping at their revels long past midnight and rising late. In a few more months, their hardened mercenaries would be little more than a slothful band of ill-kempt brigands. But for now, they were still more than sufficient to deal with Angar

and all his folk. The soldiers paid little attention to him as they led him through the ruined districts of old Hulburg in a cold, steady drizzle, but that was to his liking. For today at least the common soldiers still showed him a shred of deference, even if there were mocking smiles or muttered remarks behind his back.

Hammerbold Abbey overlooked the gray Moonsea to the south and west, offering a broad view of the city and its harbor. The old temple had been the grandest in Hulburg back in its day, but that had been two or three centuries ago. The roof had long ago fallen in, leaving a shell of a building with empty windows and an interior choked with rubble and weedy shrubs. Odelmor and another twenty warriors waited for Angar by the ruins of the Tyritc abbey.

"Ah, here you are. Angar." Odelmor said with a small smile. He was dressed in a long coat of scale armor, and wore a large broadsword with a plain, well-worn grip at his side. "As you see, we found the abbey."

Angar glanced up at the jagged walls and brushed the water from his cloak. He wore a shirt of light mail underneath, and a short sword belted at his hip. He had a little skill with a blade, but he had no illusions about besting any of the Hillsfarian expatriates, who were all seasoned mercenaries. He was armed only to protect himself against any tomb-guardians they might blunder into, and if it came to that, he was likely better off staying out of the way of more experienced fighters. "I'm afraid I don't know where the crypts lie," he said.

"No matter. Zerna here divined the entrance." Odelmor nodded at a black-cloaked woman in the robes of a mage who stood nearby. Her ash-blond hair was held in a strange

spiraling coiffure by silver combs. "My soldiers have already cleared the rubble from the doorway."

Zerna inclined her head in acknowledgment, and said, "We are ready to proceed, Lord Odelmor. If you'll follow me?"

The mage led the way as Odelmor, Angar, and a squad of mercenaries picked their way through the old temple doorway and the rubble within. Near the building's rear wall the wizard stepped aside and inclined her head; Angar saw that more of Odelmor's soldiers waited in the ruins by a narrow stairway descending into darkness. An antechamber from the main chapel? he wondered.

"Good work!" Odelmor said. "Let us see what we shall find." The exiled captain nodded to the waiting soldiers. A pair of warriors with shields and drawn swords descended carefully into the dark stairway, followed closely by two more who carried bright torches so that the soldiers in front could keep both their hands free for fighting. "After you, my lord harmach," said

Odelmor. Angar nodded and followed after the soldiers who led the way down the dust-choked steps, and then Odelmor brought up the rear with Zerna and several more of his mercenary fighters.

The stairs descended fifteen feet in a straight, steep flight before opening into a low barrel-vaulted hall with thick columns to hold up the ceiling above. The air was musty and thick. Torchlight glimmered on slick, wet masonry. Beneath their feet, worn stone slabs covered with runes—and sometimes the likeness of some long-dead person—marked dozens of crypts. Angar shivered; the place was cold and unpleasant.

Odelmor stooped down to peer at the crypts under the floor. "Common graves," he said aloud. "Well-off merchants and burghers, I would guess, but not nobles."

"Shall we open a few, my lord?" one of the warriors asked.

"It's likely not worth the trouble. Let's see if we can find the old harmachs first." Odelmor straightened and looked over at his wizard. "What does your magic tell you, Zerna?"

The black-robed mage closed her eyes and extended a hand, as if feeling for some subtle air current with her fingertips. After a moment she opened her eyes, one eyebrow raised. "I sense little gold here, my lord, but the crypts are very well-warded against divination. Even after centuries the old protections still stand. Someone was very thorough about it."

"My lord!" called another soldier from the other side of the hall. "I think I've found the royal crypts."

Odelmor hurried over; Angar followed him. The mercenary stood by a large archway in the western side of the chamber. A large round chamber lay beyond, its walls lined with eleven large sarcophagi inclined with their feet toward the center of the room. Each stone lid was carved in the image of a man or woman lying as if asleep, with old Dethek runes decorating the sides. "Ah, now this is better," the Red Plume captain said. "No pious townsfolk here, I'd wager."

Angar moved close to the nearest sarcophagus and gazed on the old stone image. It was a proud lord with a large mustache. He was shown in armor, with the mail coif and conical helm favored a century or two past. His hands gripped the hilt of a sword over his heart, with the point extending a handspan below his knees—the image of a warrior-king if he had ever seen one. A flush of shame

darkened Angar's face; he could only imagine what his ancestor would make of House Hulmaster now. With one hand he brushed the dust away from the old runes, and read aloud: "Cosimar, First Harmach of Hulburg, who reigned from the Year of the Cold Claws until the Year of the Squire."

Odelmor turned and grinned at Angar. "The founder of your line, Angar! This must be a proud day for you."

Angar's mouth twisted in a bitter smile. He doubted that Cosimar would have regarded it as a proud day. "That is not quite correct, my lord. Cosimar's line came of the Nanthon family, but they died out after a century or so. The Hulmaster line begins in 1050, the Year of the Keening Gale." He drifted to his right, passing three more sarcophagi, and stopped before the fifth in the chamber. "Here is Ivar Hulmaster, my forebear."

The Hillsfarian shrugged. He was not really interested in the details of the Hulmaster family's reign. "Zerna, do you detect any peril here?"

The mage searched the room again. "No, my lord."

"Then let's open these up and see what the old lords of Hulburg left for us," Odelmor said. He smiled at Angar, and turned his attention to supervising his soldiers as they set to work on the first of the crypts with crowbar and hammer. The shrill ring of steel on stone echoed loudly in the chamber.

Angar grimaced and returned his attention to Ivar's crypt. This one was much like Cosimar's, but Ivar was shown in a stately robe, with a tall staff at his side. Was he a wizard? Angar wondered. He'd never heard any such tale, but then again, his

father Argyl hadn't relayed much of the family history to Angar. He suspected that Argyl hadn't known much, in truth. Hulburg had been in ruins for all his father's days and for most of his grandfather's as well. Much of what the Hulmasters had once known or claimed was lost in the rubble of the city. He peered closer to study the Dethek runes under Ivar's name and the years of his reign. They read:

Ivar, Accomplished Mage and Nephew to Aesperus the Great, King of Thentia, who Granted unto Ivar and all his Descendants Dominion over Hulburg in the Year of the Keening Gale. In Keeping with the Proclamation of Aesperus the King, by the Name Hulmaster shall the Line of Ivar be Known.

Nephew to Aesperus? Angar read the inscription again, wondering if perhaps he had misread it. But the runes did not change. He snorted aloud at the irony; Odelmor had meant to mock him with the suggestion that he might learn something about the Hulmasters of old, but the expatriate lord's prediction had turned out to be true. Angar had never heard that the Hulmasters were any kin of old Aesperus. It made a grim sort of sense; Aesperus had come to power in Thentia around the year 1050, and quickly subjugated the nearby cities. Of course he would have disposed of Hulburg's old ruling line and rewarded someone close to him with lordship over the city. "Cosimar's line died out, indeed," he murmured aloud.

A loud crash of stone came from behind him, where the mercenaries had succeeded in prying off the last of the sarcophagus lids. Angar ignored it and moved to his right to examine the tomb of Ivar's successor. The carving on this one showed a warrior-mage holding a wand and a sword crossed over his chest.

Rivan Hulmaster, Son of Ivar, Harmach of Hulburg from the Year of Slaughter to the Year of the Bloody Fields. By his Valiant Rebellion was Aesperus the Tyrant Undone and his Kingdom brought to Nothing in the Year of the Bursting Song, Freeing the Realms of the Moonsea.

Angar frowned again, puzzling over the words. So Aesperus had made Ivar lord of Hulburg, but then Ivar's son had rebelled against his great-uncle? Angar knew that Aesperus's old kingdom had fallen centuries ago, but he hadn't ever wondered what part his ancestors might have played in the events of the time. The glories and triumphs of his predecessors simply were not relevant to the sadly diminished domain he ostensibly governed. He'd spent all his life surrounded by the empty ruins they'd left behind; clearly whatever victories the old Hulmasters had won in their day had not lasted long.

"One side," a soldier said to him. Angar looked up and realized that Odelmor's mercenaries had reached Rivan's crypt. He scowled, but stepped aside. Nothing he could say or do would sway Odelmor from his course. The mercenary lord's men were busy gathering the funereal jewelry from the crypts they'd already opened, while Odelmor examined the plunder—rings of gold, circlets and pendants, jeweled daggers and belts. It did not seem like very much to Angar, and the mercenaries looked disappointed in their take.

Odelmor snorted and turned away from his trinkets. "Apparently your ancestors were not as wealthy as I'd been led to believe," he said in a sour tone. "Let us hope their prosperity was greater in another harmach's reign."

Angar did not reply. The soldiers with their pry bar went to work on Rivan's sarcophagus. Stone chipped and cracked under their careless haste, and Angar winced. It was bad

enough that he had no power to keep the invaders out of this place, but he was

quickly discovering that he had more pride in his family than he remembered. To stand passively and watch his ancestors robbed of the few things they'd been buried with made him sick to his stomach. With a groan and a puff of old, foul air and dust, the stone lid slid to the floor and broke in two. The soldiers moved on to the crypt of Rivan's father, and Odelmor stepped up to peer at Rivan's ancient bones.

"Faugh! There's little in this one, as well." Odelmor motioned to another of his warriors, who eagerly came forward to strip the skeleton of its small treasures—a pair of rings, a modest gold chain around the neck, and a handsome sword with a brass hilt that lay at the dead lord's hip. He turned away from the opened sarcophagus, an ugly scowl on his face. "Were they poor, or simply stingy? Perhaps the Hulmasters of old begrudged the proper attiring of their dead."

Angar watched as the Hillsfarians finished with Rivan's crypt. He felt little kinship to the ancient corpse; he wasn't completely certain that his own father was really the Hulmaster he claimed to be, after all. But despite himself, he drifted forward to look on the crumbling bones and tattered clothing. The empty sockets gazed up at him in silent outrage, and he shuddered. He was not especially sensitive to such things, but in the lands about Hulburg there were powers who lingered in places of death, and it was not wise to provoke them. He studied the remains and started to turn away—but then his eye fell on an old amulet of some kind that was lying beneath Rivan's bones. It was a plain thing of copper, green with great age, and seemingly of no great value. Odelmor's greedy soldiers hadn't even bothered with it. Yet it caught his eye and held him. He gazed on it as the

Hillsfarrians broke open Ivar's crypt. Without really knowing why, Angar removed the amulet from the tomb.

He glanced quickly at Odelmor and his soldiers, but none had noticed him; they were busy with the last few crypts. Angar

peered at the copper amulet, brushing his fingertip over the old green metal. There was magic here, a faint cold whisper of power that brought a shudder to his frame. Strange that Odelmor's wizard hadn't discerned the amulet's enchantment, but then again, Zerna had remarked on the wards against divination; perhaps the old counterspells in the tomb had prevented her from sensing its presence. Angar could make out a faint tracery on its surface, a simple whorl with a vertical stroke and a pair of dots ... the sigil of Aesperus.

He drew in his breath with a hiss and almost dropped the thing. He'd seen the sign before in barrows or tombs claimed by the King in Copper. It was said that Aesperus was jealous of things that had once been his, and bitterly resented the living, especially those who lived in the small, weak cities that were the wreckage of his short-lived kingdom. That meant the amulet in his hand was a thing that might be deadly perilous to own. Yet the harmach Rivan had owned it once—for that matter, if the inscription on his crypt told the truth, had defied Aesperus, rebelling against him. What trinket of Aesperus's had Rivan carried to his tomb? Had it protected the first of the Hulmasters from the lich in some way? Given him power over Aesperus? Or was it merely a trophy, a memento of Aesperus's defeat?

"What do you have there, Angar?" Odelmor asked sharply.

Angar looked up, startled. Odelmor had finally noticed him. He hesitated before answering. If the amulet had some virtue of magical protection, it was very valuable, something he did not want to surrender. On the other hand, if the amulet was the property of Aesperus, something the King in Copper desired, then it was dangerous. And something that was dangerous might be turned into a weapon, if used in the right way. It occurred to him that he might be holding the tool he needed to free himself of Odelmor, if only he could think of a way to use it. But that

would never happen if he allowed the mercenary lord to take it from him.

With sudden recklessness, he decided to gamble on it. He held up the amulet in plain sight and gave a small shrug. "A trinket from one of the old lords. As long as you were helping yourself to the rest, I thought I'd keep something for myself."

Odelmor glanced at the green copper amulet. The mage sigil on it was very faint indeed, so faint that it couldn't be seen from more than a foot or two away ... or so Angar hoped. The mercenary looked back to Angar's eyes and gave a small chuckle. "Well, why not? It doesn't look like much to me. Keep it."

Angar could not bring himself to thank Odelmor for allowing him to keep something he'd just plucked from his ancestor's resting place. He nodded and slipped the amulet into a pouch by his belt. Then he withdrew to the far side of the chamber, and made a show of examining the inscriptions on the tombs of the other harmachs, hoping that no one would think to look too closely at Harmach Rivan's sarcophagus.

In another quarter-hour, Odelmor and his warriors were finished with their graverobbing in the crypt of the

harmachs. The mercenaries searched throughout the rest of the abbey's catacombs for any more tombs of interest, but after a fruitless hour Odelmor grew tired of his day's work and abandoned the effort.

They returned to the ruined chapel above. Kindon Marstel was waiting for them with a small number of his own soldiers. Together he and Odelmor inspected the plunder of the harmachs' crypts. "Hardly worth the effort," Marstel said when they finished. "I told you there was little more to gain by picking over Hulburg's bones, Hekman."

"I am beginning to believe you," Odelmor said to the other captain. He turned his attention to Angar with the predatory smile of a shark. "Surely there must be something worthwhile

here, young Angar. I grow tired of digging through rubble for shiny bits of rubbish and beggar's baubles."

Then go somewhere else! Angar fumed silently. But he kept his anger from his face and instead said, "You might recall that you aren't the first to plunder the city. Lord Odelmor. Both the Zhents and the Mulmasterians have sacked Hulburg within a man's lifetime. They left little behind, as I well know." He laughed bitterly. "I'm sure that you are familiar with the reduced circumstances of House Hulmaster."

Odelmor scowled at Angar. He had little liking for anyone laughing at his expense, regardless of the cause. "Have we reached the end of your hospitality, then?" he asked.

Angar spread his hands. "My lord, what more do you want from me and mine? You are free to make your home here—I have no strength to say otherwise. Call yourself lord or baron or harmach if you like. I cannot stop you. But if you want to

live in greater comfort and gather more wealth, your men will have to earn it with the work of their hands. I have nothing left to give you."

"I can think of one or two things more," Odelmor growled. "Your title, as you suggest. That miserable old pile you call a keep, perhaps. Or that plump little wife you try to keep hidden in your quarters. That might be an entertaining diversion for a day or two." He drew his sword and advanced on Angar.

"About time," Kindon Marstel remarked. He spat on the ground and smiled for the first time that Angar had seen.

Angar was far from ready to die on the point of Odelmor's sword, but he simply didn't see what else he could do. And the thought of the mercenary lord sitting at his place in Daggcrgard, sleeping in his bed, using his wife with the callous disregard he brought to everything he did ... he bared his teeth in a snarl of frustration and reached for the hilt of his sword. Odelmor would carve him to pieces, but at least he'd die with steel in his

hand and defiant words in his mouth. But his fingers brushed the pouch by his belt, and an idea born of desperation leaped into his thoughts.

He backed away from Odelmor and held up his hand. "Enough!" he shouted. "There may be one thing more. But you must promise to let my wife and I leave unharmed if I show it to you."

Marstel laughed drily. "He's lying, Hckman."

Odelmor hesitated and cocked his head to one side as he studied Angar's eyes. "Most likely," he admitted. "Still, it

only takes a moment to hear him out. Well, boy? What do you think you have?"

"The treasure vaults of Acsperus, King of Thentia," Angar said. "Most of his hoard was never found. I think I know where it lies."

"Bah! If you knew where to find the treasure of a king, you wouldn't be so poor," said Odelmor. "You'd have taken it for yourself long ago."

"I never dared to. The place is haunted. You'd need magic, or plenty of steel. I don't have those things, but you do. The treasure's yours for the taking—if you agree to let me go free."

"Hmmp. You won't go anywhere until we see whether there's anything to this treasure of yours." Odelmor looked over to the wizard Zerna. "What do you make of it?"

"I know of Aesperus and his old kingdom, but I've never heard of any missing treasure," Zerna answered with a shrug. "His last stronghold was somewhere nearby Hulburg. But it may not be wise to seek out the King in Copper, my lord. He had a fearsome reputation."

"You can always kill me later if I'm lying to you," Angar pointed out.

"Of course, but trust me, you'd much prefer to die now than to play me for a fool." Odelmor gazed at Angar for a long moment, then snorted. "All right. Show me where this old king's ransom is hidden."

"It would be better to go tomorrow, my lord. Your wizard is right; Aesperus is no trifling matter. You'll need more men,

and it's a few miles from here. If we leave now, we wouldn't arrive until after sundown. You should wait for daylight."

"Maybe we should, and maybe we shouldn't," Marstel said. "I think he intends some sort of mischief, Odelmor."

Odelmor nodded. "So do I." He looked at his warriors and said, "Gather the troops by the keep. I want sixty men ready to march within the hour. We'll go today."

As it turned out, it took the mercenary captains twice that long to organize their expedition. Angar wanted to go back to his keep to speak with Estine, but Marstel and Odelmor didn't allow him to. He waited by Odelmor's side as the Hillsfarrians made ready to march, wondering whether he had any hope at all of saving his own life or was simply ensuring a very unpleasant death in a few hours' time. To his surprise, he found that he was not as frightened by the prospect as he might have been. Over the last few tendays he'd expected the invading mercenaries to kill him at almost any time, and he'd simply become tired of it all. A strange, reckless mood was on him; whatever happened in the Hills, he wasn't going to be bullied and threatened by the Hillsfarrians any longer.

They set out in midafternoon, following the old road that led up the Winterspear valley. Marstel and a score of his own soldiers accompanied Odelmor and his troops. The two mercenary captains rode at the head of the column, with Angar mounted on a skittish roan gelding at their side, while most of the soldiers followed on foot. The steady rain slackened as the day waned, driven off by a cold wind from the north. Angar led the column several miles alongside the river, and then turned on a trail that climbed up the eastern side of the vale and broke

out onto the open moorlands known as the Highfells. Ahead of them the snowy Galena Mountains loomed, their peaks lost in streaming clouds.

Odelmor wrapped his fluttering cloak closer to his torso and frowned. "There's nothing but old barrows up here," he said. "Where are you taking us?"

"The Wailing lower," Angar replied. He pointed at the foothills of the mountains. "It lies another four or five miles ahead."

"We hardly needed your help to find Aesperus's old keep! Any of my men could have found their way here."

"Perhaps, but do they know the way to the Vaults of the Dead that lie beneath it?"

Marstel gave Angar a sharp look. "You mean to say that you've visited the tower and found a way to the vaults below? I can't believe that you would have the nerve for it."

"I didn't. But I've spoken with adventurers who have—the Company of the Black Griffon, for example. They found their way into the vaults and escaped with their lives."

"How do you know they didn't lie about what they found?" Odelmor demanded.

Angar shrugged. "I suppose we'll all find out soon enough."

They reached the ruins of Aesperus's final fortress an hour after sunset. The night was moonless and cold, with a bitter wind that constantly threatened to blow out the guttering torches the mercenaries lit. Long ago the old tower had been broken in a siege; the walls showed the damage of bombardment by heavy stones, and the gatehouse was little

more than a pile of rubble; Angar guessed that the building had been destroyed in the final assault. Odelmor ordered his soldiers forward, and entered the tower's courtyard only after they reported that the place was deserted.

Angar swung himself down from his mount, and paced forward, studying the old fortress as he compared what he saw with what he'd heard over the years. If he failed to find the

doorway he sought, he'd most likely die in the courtyard in a matter of minutes. Of course, there was an excellent chance that he would die if he did find the doorway. Few of those who passed within ever came out again, and while the large company of mercenaries around Angar was reassuring in its way, he had a dark suspicion that numbers might not count for much in this place. There was a deeper chill in the air than the cold north wind and the damp would seem to account for, and he shuddered. "The main tower," he told Odelmor and Marstel. "There's a hidden door in the cellars."

"You know this because you heard it from some adventurer?" Marstel asked.

"Yes, Lord Marstel. The mage Irina told me about it two years ago."

"But this adventurer and her companions didn't loot the place themselves?"

Angar allowed himself a small smile. "No. They fled for their lives."

Marstel hissed in displeasure. "So you think to lead us into a trap, then?" he demanded.

Angar shrugged. "There were seven in the Company of the Black Griffon. You have ten times that many here. What do you fear?"

Marstel scowled, but Odelmor allowed himself a small smile. "Nothing I've seen so far," he said in answer. "Lead the way, my boy."

Before he could change his mind, the young harmach took a torch from one of the mercenaries nearby and strode into the shadows of the empty tower. He could almost hear the dead of the place whispering in the darkness, a sound like the rustling of dry old leaves. The sense of unseen eyes upon him grew steadily stronger, until it was all that he could do to walk forward. Under any other circumstances Angar would have turned back then.

bin he was here 10 court death. He paused a moment within the threshold, looking in at the great ruined hall of the tower. The stones were blackened with ccenturics-old soot, and nothing remained of the furnishings or decorations that might once have been displayed here. An archway led down into darkness on the far side of the hall. If the stories he'd been told were true, that way led to the tower dungeons. A shuttle of feet and the jingle of mail at his back steeled his courage, and he crossed the hall. Wide stairs led down into the shadows.

"Caution, my lord." the wizard Zerna murmured to Odelmor behind him. "There is potent magic sleeping here, and the shadows are more than they seem."

"Do you fear to follow me?" Angar asked over his shoulder. He strode boldly down the steps, his torch Dickering weakly before him. The steps wound downward through two full turns, then opened into a wide chamber in the tower's

foundations. Here he found old bones scattered on the floor amid rusting scraps of steel—the remains of warriors who fell defending Aesperus to the last, or so he guessed. He ignored them and raised his torch higher to inspect the chamber walls. This was the weak point in his plan, for he was not exactly certain how to find the secret door Irina had spoken of before she killed herself in the guest chamber of Daggersgard, her mind unhinged by whatever had happened to her in this place. There was something about a black dragon ...

“Well? Where is your hidden door, Angar?” Odelmor asked.

Angar frowned and studied the room more closely. The floor was cluttered with the debris of fallen masonry and the old bones, so the door that Irina spoke of wasn't under the floor. The corners of the room were carved in the shape of columns with serpentine shapes winding about them; he moved to the one on his right and examined it carefully, but he could detect no hint of color. He moved on to the next one. and found the

same thing. The serpentine shape certainly looked draconic, but it had the same hue as the rest of the masonry in the room. Its face was rather skull-like, with two large horns curling forward from its head. Of course, he realized. The color's long gone, but the face is right. He set his hand on the skull-like carving, and pushed. Nothing happened, so he tried twisting and poking at the eyes, the fangs, and then the horns.

The left horn turned in his grasp. There was a sudden grating of stone behind him. and Angar whirled to find a large section of the wall nearby sinking into the floor, revealing another great staircase leading down. Eerie green light spilled out of the opening; the passage beyond was

illuminated by dimly glowing vapors swirling in thick glass globes. Statues of twisted skeletons stood arrayed in ranks to either side of the steps. The aura of menace that spilled from the passage was palpable; Angar heard the nervous muttering of the men behind Odelmor. But he forced himself to walk into the passage and descended again, this time a long, straight, shallow stair that must have burrowed far under the hillside the tower stood upon. At the end stood a great hall, with a double row of tall pillars in the shape of gaunt, groaning giants who bore the weight of the ceiling on their shoulders. More archways led deeper into the vaults and a cold wind sighed in the shadows.

“There is dread magic in this place,” the wizard Zerna murmured. “We should leave.”

Odelmor took two steps up to Angar and seized him by the arm, spinning him around. “Do you think to make a fool of me?” the Hillsfarian demanded. “I see no great treasure here! I’ll leave you bound and gagged on the floor for whatever evil spirits haunt this place if you’ve lied to us!”

“Then search the vaults for yourself,” Angar answered. “This chamber is the only one I’ve been told of. If any have ventured past this hall, they’ve never returned to tell the tale. But I haven’t

lied to you, Odelmor.” He gave a low, soft laugh. “This is the abode of Aesperus, the King in Copper, and no one has ever despoiled the vaults beyond.”

“You dare to laugh at me!” Odelmor snarled. With a single powerful blow of his mailed fist, he backhanded Angar across the mouth, sending the young lord reeling to the ground. White agony seared Angar’s face, and his vision swam darkly for a moment. When he could see and think

again, the taste of iron was in his mouth, and his hand came away from his face splattered with blood. He raised himself off the floor on his elbows and looked up, expecting to see Odelmor's blade over him. But the mercenary lord was no longer looking at him—he was staring at the dark archway opposite the entrance passage. Angar felt a cold, sick dread gathering at the nape of his neck and knew that something terrible was approaching behind him. Somehow, he found the will to turn his head and look.

At the far end of the hall stood a tall, robed figure dressed in a tattered mantle. A spiked crown rode upon its naked skull, and a deathly green flame burned in its vacant eye sockets. Bands of rune-carved copper were riveted to the yellowing bones, as if they might fall apart without the metal to join it together. Streamers of dead white mist poured out across the stone floor around it, and the very air dripped with numbing dread. It leaned on a great black staff, and it laughed in a dry and horrible voice. The sound of its scorn was like an icy hand on Angar's quivering heart.

“Such a great company!” the robed figure said. “Have you all come to help yourselves to the treasure of Aesperus, then?” It made a small motion with its hand, and at the far end of the passage the secret door guarded by the black dragon slid shut with the grating of stone.

None of the mercenaries spoke for a long moment. Then Odelmor raised his sword and pointed it at the King in Copper. “Destroy that thing,” he said in a thin voice. The sound of his

own words seemed to hearten him some, and he looked back at his soldiers. “Did you hear me? Destroy it!”

Zerna gestured with a wand and shouted out a word of arcane power. From the tip of the wand a ray of shimmering ruby energy sprang, aimed directly at the lich's heart. But dark mist seemed to gather instantly to intercept the ray a few feet from Aesperus. Crossbows thrummed as mercenaries took aim and loosed their bolts, but Aesperus ignored the missiles as if they were children's toys. They clattered from his bones or stuck in his robes without seeming to do him harm. The lich fixed his eyes on Zerna, and stretched out one bony claw toward the wizard. With a horrible shriek, Zerna crumpled, her torso crushed as if by some gigantic unseen hand. Blood burst from the mage's mouth, and then her body was dashed headlong across the room. One of the silver combs of her coiffure clattered to the stone not far from where Angar lay.

"Fools," said Aesperus. Then he intoned the words of a spell so terrible that Angar covered his ears and screamed into the dusty floor. A wave of dark power rippled through the hall, followed by a sudden chorus of screams such as he had never imagined men might make and an awful, wet, crunching sound. Swords rang on the stone floor as they fell, and the mercenaries gave in to a mad rush. Some fled down the passage despite the sealed door at the end, some ran aimlessly in the great hall or fled into the archways leading deeper into the lich's lair, and a few of the boldest and most determined rushed the lich with blades drawn.

Angar looked up just in time to see the King in Copper wrench the bones out of his attackers with that same awful sound he'd heard before. Gory flesh spilled to the ground as wet, gleaming skeletons jerked themselves upright and staggered back at the rest of the company. Shrill, wild keening arose around him, and through the walls dozens of tattered specters raced to claw at the warriors who still stood. He saw Odelmor

die with a specter's intangible talons gripped around his heart; the mercenary captain let out a low, whimpering moan, his flesh whitening as if with a sudden frost, then crumpling to the ground. Unable to bear another moment of it, Angar hid his face and screamed again, trying to shut out sight and sound of the horror unfolding around him.

After a long time, he realized that the only voice he heard screaming was his own. He fell silent, shuddering on the floor. There was no other sound in the great vault... but he was not alone. He felt again the lich's cold regard on him. "Enough," Aesperus said. "Cease your groveling and meet death with some dignity."

Angar's limbs felt weak as water, but he obeyed. Slowly he climbed to his feet, averting his eyes from the carnage around him. His hand shook as he reached into the pouch at his belt and closed his hand on the copper amulet within. "Wait, Lord Aesperus!" he said thickly through his bruised mouth. "I hold your phylactery!" Then he drew it out and held it before him.

There was a long pause before Aesperus spoke. "Where did you get that?" the lich demanded.

"From the crypt of Rivan Hulmaster, my lord."

The King in Copper said nothing in reply. Angar kept his gaze fixed on the old copper pendant whose chain he gripped in his hand. He dared not meet the lich's eyes, but he felt the awful weight of the King in Copper's regard on him. Then, finally, the lich spoke. "You are a Hulmaster," he said. His voice was like the rustling of dead leaves on a cold winter wind. "I know the smell of your blood. Did you think that little pendant would save you if you came to rob me in my house, fool?"

“No, Lord Aesperus,” Angar managed to reply. “These others who intended to rob you, they were my enemies. I came to return your property.”

“And you expect my gratitude?” the lich said softly.

Angar licked his lips. His hands were almost shaking with terror, but he pressed on. “No. I mean to bargain with you, my lord.”

The lich laughed coldly. “Why should I bargain with you? You cannot destroy me with that, young fool, while I can slay you where you stand.”

“I know it, great king. But I hope that you will see that it may be more useful to let me leave this place alive.”

“That seems unlikely. The amulet I will have in a moment regardless of what you do. What else can you offer me?”

“A fearsome reputation, my lord. I will see to it that many people learn what happened here tonight, and I will do my best to dissuade any other would-be robbers from troubling you. From this day forward, none shall rob the places of the dead in my domain if it lies in my power to stop them.”

Angar motioned with the amulet. “And, of course, I shall return this to you.”

The lich considered him for a long moment. “You must swear not only for yourself, but for all who follow in your line,” he said. “You may have little care for what follows after you die, but I may abide for centuries to come.”

Angar nodded and held out the amulet to the lich. He did not raise his eyes above the hem of the lich’s robe. “I swear it. For myself and my line after me.”

“Very well. Then you have my leave to go back to your little-realm in the Winterspear Vale. But the Highfells and the places where the dead are laid, those are mine and mine alone. Do not let my realm be troubled by any from Hulburg.” Bony fingers reached forward to take the pendant from Angar’s hand. He had to force his hand open by sheer will, and then made himself stand without shrinking away.

“I thank you, Lord Aesperus,” he said.

The lich laughed softly. “Soon enough you will lie in a tomb too. And then you will belong to me, as you have sworn. You may

rue your hasty oath on that day, young fool. Now go.”

Angar nodded and backed away, picking his way through the remnants of the Red Plume mercenaries. He stumbled on something that had once been a man’s face and his nerve broke completely. Of their own accord, his feet carried him into a mad, panicked run, and strange sobbing sounds came from his throat even as his mind reeled. He didn’t remember climbing the stairs back up to the ruined tower or floundering out of the rubble-strewn courtyard. He didn’t remember anything, in fact, until he found himself lying facedown in the thin grass of the moorland miles from the Wailing Tower, with the pale glow of sunrise lightening the clouds to the east.

Trembling, he climbed to his feet again and glanced behind him. He saw nothing but the deep shadows of the mountains. He turned the other way and saw the trail leading back to Hulburg ahead. Odelmor was dead, and Marstel too, and with them the better part of their mercenaries. Whatever awaited Angar in the morning, it was certainly better than what he had just escaped.

“There are still a hundred or more of Odelmor and Marstel’s men camped in Hulburg,” he reminded himself. And then he laughed, long and shrilly, a laugh that was not quite as steady as it should have been, a laugh that had little humor in it. “But they certainly won’t be robbing any more tombs in Hulburg, will they?”

The mercenaries who remained were in need of a new lord, even if they didn’t know it yet. And if they wanted to eat, well, he had little more food to surrender, but he had land to grant them for homesteads and pastures. He snorted, wondering if he could make himself harmach of Hulburg in fact and not only in name. Then Angar Hulmaster squared his shoulders and walked down to meet the coming day.

Dusty Bones

Rosemary Jones

waterdeep

23 Mirtul, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

wind blowing over the graveyard wall rilled the courtyard of Dead End House with the scent of new leaves and a trace of early morning mist. It was a soft breeze, a warm breeze, a breeze that promised sunshine later in the day.

Standing on the front doorsteps, Lcaplow took a deep breath. He loved days like this, when he could practically hear the trees growing in the City of the Dead on the other side of the wall. Days like this were full of life and there would be girls, pretty girls from all the wards of the Waterdeep, strolling the south end of the cemetery, admiring the famous monuments and taking a moment's respite from the hustling streets.

And when the ladies stopped to admire the statues and memorials to the heroes of the city's fabled past, they were sure to notice the fine strapping lad polishing away on the brass trimmings or the marble columns. Especially if he pushed his shirtsleeves high on his arms to bare muscles that he knew couldn't be matched in most of Waterdeep. What did it matter if they were strolling with their escorts? There wasn't a man

within or without the city walls that he couldn't take, not if it was a fair fight. And if a fellow wanted to put up his fists and take exception to Leaplow winking at his lady, well, then the day might get very interesting and exciting indeed!

With a whistle as lilting as any bird's spring song, Leaplow rolled up his sleeves in anticipation of a fine day's work in the City of the Dead. Only to be interrupted by the solitary dark cloud marring his morning: his third cousin

Fitnor crossing the courtyard with a loolbag slung over his shoulder.

“I don’t understand why your father won’t give me better work than cleaning some old statue,” Fitnor whined at him.

Leaplow looked down at the weedy youth and stifled a sigh. Fitnor was a Carver, as established through some complicated tracing of the family tree, but he certainly didn’t look like one. Most Carvers tended to be big, broad-shouldered, and generously endowed with thick heads of black curly hair. Fitnor was short, stoop-shouldered, and his pale hair flopped back and forth over a high pink forehead. His nose twitched constantly and there was something vaguely rodcntlike about his entire aspect. Especially on days like this, when he stood slouched before a man who would much rather look at a lady in all her spring finery than a fidgety gent like Fitnor.

Still, Fitnor was a Carver, and that meant he could not ignore him or drop him in the nearest open grave. A fact that had been much impressed on Leaplow by his calm mother Reye, his far feistier grandmother Myemaw, and his even bossier little sister Sophraea ever since Fitnor first fetched up on their doorstep a few months ago.

This remote cousin asked to be taken into the family business. The Carvers built the monuments, tombs, coffins, and other grave goods for the soon-to-be permanent residents of the City of the Dead and its outlying graveyards. All the Carvers living in Dead End House had been training in their craft all their

lives. Even the Carver wives, the ladies who married into the family, came from funerary families in the ward. So, not only did everyone already have a job, they also knew how to do

that job much better than Fitnor. And, to make matters worse, the fellow seemed exceptionally useless.

At first the family had suggested that Fitnor join the two gravediggers employed by the Carvers, as digging was a task that anyone could do. But Fitnor flatly refused to work with either Fish or Feeler, objecting to those fellows' scales and tentacles, a fine show of prejudice that had hurt the gravediggers' feelings and quietly appalled the rest of the family. Though Fish and Feeler were not Carvers, they had lived in the basement of Dead End House for a good many years and were considered close friends if not actual kin.

That had been the start of a long winter of trying to find a place for this odd cousin from far away, with each of Leaplow's uncles passing Fitnor quickly through his workshop to the next man. So far, nobody had discovered any of the usual Carver talents in Fitnor. He had no aptitude for stone or wood, according to Leaplow's father Astute, and Fitnor's stitching on the shrouds sent Leaplow's aunt Catletho shrieking through the house. When Fitnor broke two of Leaplow's uncle Judicious's favorite lock mechanisms, intended to keep a wandering dead man locked firmly in his mausoleum, that was the end of his time in the workshops surrounding the courtyard of Dead End House.

For a time, Fitnor worked inside the house itself, helping Reyc, Sophraea, and Mycmaw, until all three firmly requested that he be taken outside again and put to work elsewhere.

At that point, everyone suggested that Fitnor assist Leaplow in maintaining tombs within the City of the Dead.

Now, Leaplow knew that the many odd jobs that he was assigned by his father and his uncles, like polishing the

brasswork and cleaning the marble of the fancy monuments at the south end

of the City of the Dead, were meant to inspire him to seek more skilled work, such as coffin carving, for his permanent career.

However, while Leaplow had enjoyed his various apprenticeships under his uncles and was perfectly able to master any of the family's skills, he was in no hurry to shed his reputation for perennial misconduct and spend more time in one of the Carver workshops under the supervision of said uncles, various aunts, older brothers, or his father. Time enough for that when he was older, much older, in Leaplow's opinion.

Since the age of fourteen, when he'd punched his way through a crowd of drunken fighters just because they bet that he couldn't and been brought home by the City Watch with two spectacular black eyes and some even more fantastic bruises, Leaplow had been in perpetual disgrace, a state that he enjoyed as much as he could and considered far more interesting than being a "respectable" Carver. Later exploits, including starting a street wrestling show with his cousins Bentnor and Cadriffle, had been fun for him but led to even more lectures from his grandmother and more work assignments in the City of the Dead meant to "teach that boy a lesson."

Leaplow never minded these tasks. After all, there were definite benefits to working alone in the City of the Dead; far from the watchful eyes of his large and inquisitive family. Working by himself, should he spot a pretty ankle passing by or a gentleman who looked like he needed a little lessoning in the hardness of a Carver fist, Leaplow could stuff his toolbag inside the nearest tomb and follow his nose.

But Fitnor trailing through the tombstones behind him had ended his days of seeking entertainment in the City of the Dead and the rowdier streets of Waterdeep. For the last eight days, Leaplow had arrived home well before dark, sober, unmarked, and thoroughly annoyed at the way his life was turning out.

Still, not even Fitnor could ruin a perfect spring day, Leaplow decided. And, after making that decision, he clapped his fretful cousin on the shoulder and steered him to the family gate that led into the City of the Dead.

“Why do we need to clean this statue?” Fitnor whined beside him, still grumbling about Astute’s latest assignment for the two men.

‘It s an important job that we are doing,” Leaplow declared. “Why, the Ahghairon’s Statue is famous! And we’re not just cleaning. We’re checking the whole site, the torch mounts, the big steps, everything, to sec if anything needs repair this summer. Then we’ll survey the resr of the public monuments in the southern end. After all, everyone knows about them, everyone comes to see them, they have even written books about the City of the Dead and its fine memorials. It’s our job to make sure it all looks as good as the day we built it.”

Going through the family’s private gate in the wall, Leaplow tumbled down the steps into the City of the Dead at his usual quick pace, hauling Fitnor with him.

“But I thought the family worked inside the tombs, not just doing odd jobs outside,” Fitnor complained as he skidded along the gravel paths, dragged at a faster pace than usual by Leaplow’s friendly hand on his shoulder.

“Outside, inside, on the roof, underneath. Whatever needs patching, painting, plastering, polishing, or otherwise repairing.” Leaplow chuckled. “Of course, we build monuments too. However you like, whenever you like, but just not inside the wall.”

“But this is the City of the Dead!” exclaimed Fitnor.

“And full of all the work of the Carvers that came before us, so full there’s not a bit of room for anything new,” said Leaplow with an affectionate glance at the barrel tombs and the gabled mausoleums that they were passing. He even gave a good luck pat in passing to a marble sarcophagus that stood on four firm marble lion paws. “Our generation will be building the outer

graveyards, like Coinscoffin, where there is still space for something grand. But many of our clients go back generations and some still maintain tombs that past Carvers built. Which means they pay us to keep it all tidy and ready for the next resident, as you might say. That’s the way that it has always been.”

“But I thought we would be going inside the tombs here,” Fitnor repeated.

“Why would you want to do that? It’s much more interesting out here.” Leaplow grinned at two pretty maids strolling down the path toward them. They simpered and blushed as they passed him by. He raised his hand to flatten down his curls, being sure to flex his muscles when they were closest to him. The pair burst into giggles. Leaplow watched them over his shoulder. They looked back over their shoulders at him and giggled even louder.

“I wonder where they live.” he mused out loud.

"I think I should see the inside of a tomb," whined Fitnor, who had apparently not even noticed the two maids. He took an abrupt left, going off the main path into one of the smaller ones winding back into a cluster of old family monuments. "Like that one over there! Didn't a Carver build it?"

"You are the strangest fellow," Leaplow remarked. The place that Fitnor picked out was built from gray and red granite with a badly tarnished brass door. Leaplow couldn't remember it ever being on the summer maintenance list, which meant whoever was buried inside probably didn't have any living relatives left. Eventually some Carver would get to it, just to make sure that it wasn't deteriorating into ruin. But with more and more of the great families dying out or dwindling down to one or two ancient representatives, such slightly neglected gravesites were not uncommon.

"I'm just interested in what your... our... family has done," Fitnor said, circling the tomb. "I think I saw a sketch of this in one of those books that Judicious has in his workshop."

"We Carvers've touched most of what is built inside the City of the Dead," Leaplow said, looking closely at the tomb. A large hexagonal knob protruded from the metal door. "A few generations back from the style. Well, it is locked up tight. There is no going into this one."

"But where's the lock? There's no keyhole." Fitnor pointed at the door.

"It's a twist and turn and pull," said Leaplow, bending down to examine the six-sided brass-and-copper knob set in the center of the door.

"Can you open it?" Fitnor was practically bouncing up on his toes. Leaplow blinked at his cousin's excitement. There were

far more interesting monuments elsewhere.

Still, it couldn't hurt to take a closer look. "You have to know the right sequence to open this type of twisting lock," said Leaplow. "It's a real antique all right. Judicious has a few examples in his workshop. You should ask him to show you how they work."

"I did," grumbled Fitnor. "and he wanted me to take something apart and put it back together again."

"Oh, that's how he taught all of us to know our locks. That and memorizing the old designs shown in the journals like Happenstance's sketchbook."

Leaplow spat on his thumb and rubbed at the dirt on the knob. A maker's mark became clear, a curling initial "HC" that marked the center of the doorknob. "Yep, this is Happenstance's handiwork; that would make it nearly two hundred years old."

"Happenstance Carver. I don't remember hearing that name before," said Fitnor.

Leaplow shook his head. Fitnor had obviously not listened to any of Judicious's tales. Happenstance was his uncle's favorite Carver, at least in terms of telling family stories, as Happenstance apparently shared his passion for elaborate ways

to prevent graverobbers from getting in and other things from getting out of tombs like this one. Leaplow clearly recalled one day as a boy when Judicious took down Happenstance's little brown sketchbook and showed off this long-gone relation's many designs. The locks were interesting, but Leaplow had liked much better the sketch of

a lady fighter that graced the center page of Happcnstancc's little book.

"Happenstance was one of those Carvers who never married, wedded to his locks and keys, they say," Leaplow explained to this cousin who had been deprived of such experiences by a life lived outside Dead End House. "Judicious has his sketchbook in the workshop. Happenstance was something of a genius according to Judicious. Invented several lock mechanisms that we still use today to baffle thieves."

"But can you open it?" Fitnor asked.

"Well, if it wasn't a special commission," said Leaplow, who actually remembered a great deal more of his uncle's lecrures on locks than anyone would suspect, "it might use Flappcnstancc's standard sequence. Three twists to the left, a turn to the right, and pull straight out." He wrapped his fingers around the brass knob and tried it. The mechanism was stiff but the knob turned with only a little application of pressure. The lock clicked open on his final pull.

"That's it then." said Leaplow. The sun shone warm on his shoulders. Time to leave this out-of-the-way tomb and return to the more public areas of the City of the Dead. Such a fine day would bring out a crowd. He couldn't wait to see who would pass him by. "You turn the reverse order to lock it again."

Fitnor grabbed at his wrist, stopping him from completing that action.

"Let's go inside," said his odd cousin. "Let's go inside and take a look before you lock it up again."

Leaplow looked down at the smaller man and stifled a sigh.

This little tomb looked to be cold, dusty, and full of nothing more interesting than old bones. By the time that he was ten, Leaplow had explored most of the open and easy-to-open monuments in the City of the Dead. He'd gone through the portals and rummaged through the outlying cemeteries. He'd even figured out how to break into the Hall of Sages, only to discover all the stories about lost treasure and tomes containing the magical wisdom of Watcrdeep were only that. Stories. When he'd voiced his disappointment, his incredibly ancient relative Volponia had said, "That rumor had long whiskers on it when I was a girl. What Carver would believe that there was treasure in the Hall of Sages?"

"There's nothing in tombs like this," Leaplow told Fitnor. "Just dust."

"I still want to sec it," said Fitnor, ducking under his arm and pushing the door open. The little man scurried inside the tomb.

For a long moment of temptation, Leaplow considered pulling the door shut and locking his cousin inside. After all, when he'd done that to Sophraea at the age of seven, his sister hadn't died of fright nor had anything else remotely interesting happened. Of course, there was still that scar across his shin where Sophraea had kicked him, and his father had loaned him to the local stablemaster to clean out the stalls of the coffin-wagon horses for a considerable time.

"Not worth it," decided Leaplow as he followed Fitnor into the vault. Better to coax his cousin outside and get today's work done than to spend the rest of the summer spreading manure under the trees and bushes of the City of the Dead because his grandmother felt he needed a lesson. Fertilizing was one of those tasks that let a man roam where he

wanted, but the ladies did object to the smell at the end of the day!

As he suspected, the tomb contained nothing of interest. Just a tiny stone room with the only illumination being a pot of eternal flame set high in a wall niche. A plain wooden casket occupied the center of the floor.

“Indoors, coffin. Outdoors, sunshine.” said Leaplow, swinging his hand around to illustrate his point. “I know where I’d rather be. Cousin.”

“Quiet,” snapped Fitnor. louder than Leaplow had ever heard him. “It’s just as the scroll described it.”

“What scroll?” Leaplow didn’t like the way that Fitnor was scrambling around the casket, poking and prying at the lid. Somebody had scaled this coffin with lead, never a good sign.

“The scroll of the Splendid Archlis.” Fitnor said.

“Never heard of it.” A large lead circle occupied the center of the coffin’s lid. From where he stood, Leaplow could see that it was inscribed with the type of odd scribbles employed by wizards. A lifetime of working in the City of the Dead made him fairly certain that such things should not be disturbed.

Fitnor sniffed. “Some say that Archlis and his book is just a myth, a tale out of the old times, but I knew a man who inherited a copy of the page made from the book.”

“I thought you said it was a scroll.” Leaplow circled around the coffin. The thing was chained to the floor too. And locked down. And every lock bore the stamp of Happenstance Carver. A sensible man might have grabbed his cousin and

tossed him out the tomb door upon making such observations.

But Leaplow hated to think of himself as sensible. If he waited a moment or more, he might see something worth retelling in a tavern.

“There was a book. The book of the Splendid Archlis. lost in the grand library of Procampur.” Fitnor slid one incredibly dirty fingernail into a crack in the lead sealing down the lid and worried the lead like a scrabbling rat. “But a few pages were liberated and turned into a scroll.”

“Here now, don’t hurt yourself!” Leaplow was more worried

by the crazy smile wreathing Fitnor’s face than the widening crack in the lead. It looked like the lead was just melting away from Fitnor’s finger as he whispered his way around the edge of the coffin.

The little man must be ill or mad, to be babbling about some book from a library in a city that Leaplow had never heard of and picking and prying at that box. Perhaps he should be taken out of this chamber and straight back to Dead End House. Mycmaw or Reye would know how to fix him. Still Leaplow hesitated, wondering what exactly was inside the coffin.

“Treasure hunters spent years seeking the maps taken from the book. Everyone knew it was full of the mage-lord’s greatest secrets, maps showing all the paths leading to the lost relics of greater days.” Sweat streamed across Fitnor’s forehead, plastering his lanky hair into his wildly gesturing eyebrows. “But the librarians of Procampur were cunning. They kept it hidden among old records of fraudulent accounting. Only one man ever found it and he had only a short time to copy a few pages into a scroll.”

“Well, now, that’s quite a story,” said Leaplow, who was paying more attention to Fitnor’s antics around the coffin than the words babbling out of his cousin’s mouth. The lead now peeled off in a long soft strip. Fitnor shoved at the gap and a foul puff of orange smoke leaked out of the coffin.

“Ha!” cried Fitnor. “That won’t work against me!” He shouted some more words that Leaplow didn’t recognize and the plume of dust curled back into the coffin. But a stench still filled the room, like the smell of old stone mixed with graveyard dirt, a stagnant smell like the ones that lingered in the lower sewers of Waterdcep.

The minute Fitnor started shouting words in an arcane language at the coffin, and the coffin sucked in its own smoke in response, Leaplow knew it was time to leave. Carvers stayed away from spells and rituals. Magic done wrong tended to have

a disastrous effect in the City of the Dead. And it was far too easy to do it wrong and annoy some permanent resident of the graveyard.

Leaplow grabbed at the smaller man, intending to pick him up and carry him out of the tomb.

Fitnor snarled and gestured with both hands, striking with open palms toward Leaplow.

Something hit Leaplow’s chest like a well-driven blow from a bigger man, shoving him hard into the wall of the tomb.

Leaplow coughed in surprise. Fitnor hadn’t laid an actual finger upon him, but he could feel a bruise blossoming across his chest.

He shoved away from the wall, intent on wrestling his sly cousin to the floor.

Fitnor yelled at him, "Go away!" Then his cousin gestured again with both hands. Leaplow went flying backward through the tomb door, bounced down the steps, and skidded across the well-groomed grass to land in a heap in the middle of the gravel path.

A noble lady languidly strolling through the City of the Dead on the arm of her even nobler escort came to abrupt halt as Leaplow tumbled almost beneath her silk skirts.

"Whatever are you doing?" she said in shrill tones as she gathered her skirts up in one hand and stepped away from the winded Leaplow. Her escort simply stared with his mouth hanging open like a speared fish.

Leaplow took a moment to catch his breath and wait for the white clouds overhead to stop spinning before his eyes. Then he sprang up, shook the dust out of his curls with one sweep of his hand, and strode back to the tomb. Over his shoulder, he remarked to the lady and her stunned escort, "Beg your pardon! Needed elsewhere!" Then, because she was a rather lovely lady with anger reddening her cheeks, he added, "Save a kiss for me. This won't take long!"

Leaplow kicked the door of the tomb open. He charged toward Fitnor, intent on slinging the littler man outside.

The lid of the coffin was partially shoved to one side and Fitnor had one hand inside the casket. He was groping for something when Leaplow grabbed him.

"No!" screamed Fitnor as Leaplow attempted to drag him away from the coffin.

This time the magical force slung by his surprising cousin hurled Leaplow into the ceiling of the stone room. His head banged hard against the rock and he dropped down on the coffin lid, knocking it to one side and cracking the lead seal set in the center. Then he rolled off the lid and banged his head even harder onto the stone floor.

In a foggy, distant way, Leaplow was aware that his cousin Fitnor was screaming. Something else was making noise too. A hideous moan wailed through the room, reverberating through his abused skull. The tomb air thickened and the stench of dust made him cough, the pain confirming that he'd cracked at least one rib in his bounce around the room.

Fitnor shrieked, "Keep away! Keep away! It is mine!" A terrible wind sprang up, sweeping a cloud of bloodred dust out the tomb door. Fitnor leaped over Leaplow's body, nearly braining him with his boot heel. Something big also jumped over Leaplow, landing with a crash on the other side and following Fitnor out the door. From where he lay on the floor, the creature pursuing Fitnor looked like a crumbling statue made out of rusty red stone. The creature's heavy feet stamped down on the threshold of the tomb, cracking the marble underfoot, and then it was gone.

Leaplow passed out.

As usual when somebody knocked him hard on the head, Leaplow was only out for a minute or so. He awoke remarkably

clear on what he wanted to do next—catch his cousin Fitnor and punch him in the nose.

Then he opened his eyes and noticed the woman. She was standing beside him, looking down with one slender black

eyebrow arched in inquiry. There was something oddly familiar about her face.

Glancing down, Leaplow could clearly see his own battered face in the well-polished plate armor protecting her long legs. In fact, all her armor was so brilliantly shined that it seemed to glow with its own light. Her pale skin and black hair sparkled in the dim light of the tomb. And her eyes, her blue eyes, were as bright as the eternal flame burning directly behind her. The flame that he could distinctly see flickering even though she stood between him and the lamp.

"If you are a ghost, does that mean that I am dead?" Leaplow asked.

"I do not think you would be bleeding quite so much if you were dead." she remarked, reaching down a hand to pull him up. Despite its slightly translucent appearance, her hand seemed too warm and strong for a dead woman.

"But you are a ghost?" Leaplow asked.

She smiled at him with a flash of white teeth. "More a living memory of what I was than an actual spirit. It's one of my aunt Gunderal's spells. She thought somebody should be around in case old Dusty Bones broke out again. What you see is the bit of me that we put into the seal, just in case. But, honestly, we thought we had solved the problem when we brought him to Watcrdeep and locked him up here."

Leaplow fingered the scalp wound at the edge of his hairline. It wasn't bad. Only needed a stitch or two. He knotted a couple of strands of hair together to pull the wound closed for the moment. Then he answered her, "I didn't understand a thing you said."

She threw back her head and laughed, a deep laugh that filled the room with its warmth.

“Happenstance made the exact same remark to me the day that I asked him to lock up the coffin,” she confessed. “You must be a Carver. You look so much like him.”

“Leaplow Carver,” he answered with a bow that made his head swim.

“Ash of Procampur,” she flourished a bow far finer than his and ended with a grin that made his head swim even more. “There re many more names than that, but I won’t bore you with the whole list. I need to stop old Dusty Bones.”

She reached past Leaplow to pull up one of the chains that had been used to tic down the coffin. With a push of one finger, she clicked open Happenstance s lock to free the chain. She shook the lock and then put it up to her ear, like a child listening to a seashell. Ash grinned. “Still clicking away. That Happenstance! He certainly could forge a good binding. I should still be able to chain Dusty Bones with these.” She wound the chain up in her left hand and secured the lock through one link.

“What’s Dusty Bones?” Leaplow called after her as she strode to the tomb’s door.

“Trouble. But he is bent on catching that thief who opened his coffin. I need to stop him before too much damage is done.”

“Fitnor,” Leaplow looked around the tomb and realized his odd cousin was gone. “What did he take out of the colfin?”

“A page out of an old book. If used with a certain map, it shows the way to break into Dusty Boncs’s first crypt and

steal his treasure. And he's not one who likes to share. We dug him out of the tunnels after he turned an old friend into stone. But we couldn't destroy him, just box him up." Ash talked as fast as she walked, tossing her words back over her shoulder at the

still bemused Leaplow. He had to stretch his own legs to match her pace.

They headed toward the main paths. Ash strode ahead like a woman who knew where she was going, looking more solid in the sunlight than she had appeared in the tomb. But whenever she passed through a shadow, Leaplow could see her armor sparkle with its own light and dimly make out the shapes of objects beyond her.

Two stone statues stood where Leaplow had never seen statues before. One was a finely dressed lady clutching her skirts tight against her legs. The other was a long-faced nobleman with his mouth hanging open.

Leaplow took a second look. It was the pair that he'd encountered outside the tomb.

"What happened to them?" Leaplow said.

Ash did not pause. "Dusty Bones. They're lucky. If he wasn't running so fast after the thief, he would have done more than that. Knocked them into rubble." She waved one hand in the air, gesturing behind her. "You better go home, Leaplow Carver. This isn't your fight. And there's not much you can do against Dusty Bones."

Leaplow stared down the path. On either side, he could see various monuments carved by his ancestors. Some bore new cracks and chips, as if something large and heavy had slammed into them in passing. On the roof of one tomb, a

pair of guardgoyles cringed, hiding their heads under their wings as if to escape notice of something fiercer than themselves.

“Dusty Bones?” he asked, pointing at the damage.

Ash nodded, quickening her pace, and Leaplow matched it with his own stride, staying close to her side. “He’ll destroy anything made out of stone or metal if he can. Right now he’s concentrating on catching the thief. But it will get worse.”

“Not in my graveyard,” said Leaplow, balling up his fists.

“We built those monuments. We take care of them. No dusty fellow is going to turn people into stone here or wreck the City of the Dead.”

Ash reached into her armor and pulled out a silver feather hanging on a silk cord. “If you won’t go back, put this on,” she said. “If Gundcral’s magic is still working, this should protect you from his dust.”

“Don’t you need it?”

She turned her face toward him and he could see her eyes sparkle in the shadow of a weeping tree overhanging a memorial pond. “I’m more spirit than substance,” she said. “I don’t think his dust can touch me.”

He slipped the cord over his neck. “But this feels solid,” he said, fingering the silver feather.

“Well, you’re a solid fellow, like most Carvers,” she replied with a smile. “As long as you’re wearing it, it should be as real as you. Just as it would be insubstantial on me.”

Ahead of them, Leaplow could hear screams and running feet. A plume of orange dust hung in the air, marking the creature's passage through the City of the Dead. Unlike in the tomb, he could smell nothing, even as he passed through the unnatural wisp of dust left behind. The air he sucked in his lungs as he prepared to fight felt clean, and cold, and tasted slightly of salt. It felt like the wind when it blew straight off the harbor. It made him feel even bigger and stronger than ever before.

"Good charm, isn't it?" Ash said as his chest swelled with the delightful breeze. "A sea wind combined with a little extra strength. She calls it Flying Above Waves. She is good at charms, my aunt Gunderal."

"Amazing," said Leaplow as he bounded past two more statues, both members of the City Watch with swords upraised and angry expressions on their faces.

Fitnor was halfway up the steps to the Hall of Heroes. Behind him, a living being of rusty red stone cracked each stair with its heavy tread. Its rocklike hands stretched toward the little man. Fitnor was screaming and gesturing wildly, a piece of parchment waving in one hand.

"Hey, Dusty Bones, what are you doing out of your box?" yelled Ash as she charged forward. She flipped the chain out to its full length and swung it over her head. Happcnstance's lock whistled through the air.

With a roar, the creature turned back to her, a wave of dust rolling off its emaciated stone hide to engulf the glowing fighter. She plowed through it with Leaplow close on her heels.

The creature punched at both of them, slamming into them with its stony fists. Ash simply melted around it, flowing away to stand one step higher than the creature. She flung the chain around its neck.

Leaplow was aware of the blow in the same way that he was aware of the dust streaming past him; neither seemed to actually touch him. With his own roar, he punched back at the creature and caught it squarely under its hideous chin. It flailed with one hand, missing him completely, then turned and bolted after Fitnor. Ash hung onto the chain and was dragged along with it. Leaplow raced after them.

Leaplow's cousin took advantage of the momentary distraction to race through the doors and into the blue marble hall with its many memorials to the fallen of Waterdeep.

The stony corpse pursuing him punched right and left. An iron kettle filled with donations for the care of the families of fallen warriors crumbled at its touch and the coins scattered clinking across the floor. A plaque bearing the names of the heroes of a long forgotten battle shattered into fragments of stone.

The creature whirled again and struck a blow toward the famed blue marble walls that Leaplow had polished so many times in the past.

"No, you don't!" he screamed, flinging his body between the wall and the stone corpse's terrible fist. Dusty Bones hammered him into the marble but the wall remained uncracked.

Ash hauled harder on the chain, pulling Dusty Bones off and dragging it away screeching step by screeching step.

The creature's feet left deep grooves in the floor as she pulled it into an empty space in the center of the hall.

"Keep your hands to yourself," she commanded as she wound the chain down from the creature's neck and around its body. With every twist of her glowing hands, the chain seemed to stretch longer and longer, enmeshing the thrashing Dusty Bones. The creature roared but was unable to escape her grasp.

Leaplow levered himself off the floor. Fitnor was standing at the far end of the hall in front of the portal that led to the fields where the warriors of Watcrdec were buried. His cousin bent down, chalking strange symbols in front of the portal and muttering as quickly as he sketched the runes.

Years of hearing the City Watch yell at him made Leaplow certain of the proper phrase to shout.

"Here now. what are you doing?" he said as he stood up. "You'd better stop that!"

Fitnor whipped around. "An entire winter," he yelled at Leaplow. "An entire winter of working! All to find the right tomb in the Carver ledgers. You are not stopping me now."

"Hah!" said Leaplow as he punched his cousin in the face. The little man staggered back, his boot heels scuffing across the chalk marks on the floor. Behind him, the portal wavered, light flickering across it. Blood streamed from Fitnor's nose.

"Get off me," Fitnor groaned nasally. He pushed his hands toward Leaplow as if to throw him across the room again. Whether it was the charm around Leaplow's neck or Fitnor's bloody nose that interfered with his incantation, this time Leaplow remained standing solidly in front of him.

“Hah!” said Leaplow again and clouted his cousin, a straight body blow that knocked Fitnor off his feet. The little man dropped the piece of paper that he had been clutching as he slid across the marble floor and into the portal. A flash of light and a boom like thunder sounded through the Hall of Heroes. Fitnor vanished.

Leaplow nearly jumped after his cousin, sure that he’d been tumbled into the grassy fields at the other end of the portal, but then Ash yelled.

“Need some help,” she panted. Dusty Bones still struggled to get away, lashing out with its legs. While the creature’s hands were bound to its side, its kicking feet still cracked or crumbled every piece of stone or metal that it touched.

With a shout at the damage done, Leaplow jumped upon Dusty Bones, smashing so hard into the foul creature that it toppled onto the floor with bang.

“Hold him still!” yelled Ash. still twisting the ever-growing chain so it bound the creature’s ankles. Dusty Bones rolled over and over. She continued to battle, but her face looked weary and the sparkle of her skin began to dim. Each time the creature hit her. she grew slightly more transparent.

Leaplow bounced hard upon Dusty Boncs’s chest, using his knees to try to knock its breath out, a maneuver more successful against past opponents than this stony monster. The creature squirmed beneath him and another cloud of dust rose to engulf them. This time its miasma was so thick that he could barely see the blue marble walls through the swirling haze. Slamming into the creature again, Leaplow clenched his arms and legs around Dusty Bones. Using all his charm-enhanced strength, he strained, seeking to roll Dusty Bones over and smash its face against the floor.

Even bound by Ash's chain and prone, the thing still fought, heavier than any tombstone and twice as difficult to move.

Leaplow bunched his muscles and dug in. The shirt straining across his broad shoulders ripped along the seams. Then he felt it. the slightest of tremors, so much like the shudder of a weakening opponent in a street-wrestling match. He pushed harder, using all the power in his legs for leverage.

"Got you!" he cried as, with a whoop, he flipped Dusty Bones face down on the floor.

Ash leaped upon the creature's back, looping the chain around its ankles, bending its leg back at the knee, and yanking the chain's ends up to its arms. She clicked shut Happcnstancc's lock to linish off her knot of chain. Dusty Bones could do no more damage.

A winded Leaplow straightened up. He looked around the Hall of Heroes. It looked worse than any room in Dead End House after he and his brothers had rampaged through it during one of their friendly bouts. Debris from the fight littered the floor. Anything not broken was tossed or tumbled into the corners. Days of clean up and even more days of repair work were evident wherever he looked.

"I guess I should have kept Fitnor from opening that coffin," he said without too much remorse. Even bound with chains, the creature twisting at his feet had given him the best wrestling match that he had ever had. And punching Fitnor through that portal! Well, that memory just had to make a fellow grin.

"If you hadn't broken the seal on the coffin with your head, I wouldn't have appeared or been able to go after him." Ash replied. "But we're not done yet, we need to throw this trash

away." She kicked at Dusty Bones with one semi-transparent boot.

Leaplow grabbed one end of the chain. "Do you want to take him back to the tomb?"

"No, that's too easy to find. We thought hiding him here among so many magical dead would baffle any thief."

"If you buried him in Happenstance's day, it did work. For almost two hundred years."

"Can't chance it," said Ash. "With the seal broken, I won't be coming back if he gets out a second time. We need to drop him somewhere far away, where he can do no harm."

With Leaplow's help, she started dragging the bound Dusty Bones to the portal at the end of the hall.

"You shouldn't put him in the field where the warriors are buried," Leaplow said. "People go there all the time. Somebody will find him."

"That's not where the portal leads, not for the moment," she answered. Ash nodded at Fitnor's chalk marks on the ground. "That wizard changed its direction, at least for a short time."

"But where has he gone?" asked Leaplow.

"Seeing how your fighting messed up those marks," she said, shoving Dusty Bones closer to the glowing portal, "not anywhere that he expected." She stared a moment longer, as if she could see whatever place was on the other side. Then she grinned. "Not a good place at all. Well, they can keep each other company."

She pushed Dusty Bones across the chalk marks and through the portal. There was another flash of light and a clap of thunder,

“So is the portal ruined?” Leaplow asked, wondering if there was anything in the family ledgers on how to fix it. There were at least two burials scheduled in the coming tendays for that field.

“Clean up the marks on the floor and it will settle back into its old state,” Ash advised him.

Her glow continued to fade and she was a sparkling shadow, barely discernable from the other shadows creeping through the Hall of Heroes.

“Wait!” he said, reaching out his hand to grab her. His fingertips tingled as they brushed her arm. but there was no more substance to her. His hand passed through the shining armor encasing her.

“Fight’s over,” said Ash. “Time co go home to my family.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, a kiss like a spark against his face, a moment’s warmth, a gentle shock that faded immediately.

Then she was gone and there was nothing in the room but the usual shades, flickering uncertainly across the blue marble walls.

Leaplow pulled a rag out of his back pocket and carefully wiped away Fitnor’s marks. Then he sat back on his heels and watched the portal until it had subsided into its usual state. He stepped through, onto the sweet grass of the field where the warriors lay. The stalks bent gently before a spring breeze. No sign of struggle or disturbance marred this

peaceful place. Wherever Fitnor and Dusty Bones had gone, it was not here.

Leaplow stepped back through the portal into the Hall of Heroes. The debris was still there. He shrugged. What had been broken could be repaired or replaced by the Lunily. Then he rubbed his bruised jaw. Of course, he wasn't quite sure how he was going to explain the whole mad fight to them. Probably there would be some yelling when they saw the mess.

Didn't matter, he thought. In the end, the Carvers would do as they'd always done and help him clean it up. That was the beauty of his family and worth more than any mythical treasure that Fitnor thought could be found in a crypt.

Something crackled under his foot. He plucked a piece of paper from the floor. When he smoothed it out, he saw Fitnor had dropped a detailed drawing of a vault, with notes on traps and secret doors. One of the uncles might find this interesting, Leaplow decided. He stuffed the paper into his pocket and headed out the door.

With a grin, Leaplow strolled by the wizard of the Watchful Order trying to unpetrify the two guards frozen in the path.

"There's another pair over there," he told the wizard. "A nice-looking lady and her horse-laced companion."

"Did you see what caused this?" the wizard asked.

"Me, no, not at all," Leaplow said, because any other answer would mean delays and he wanted to get home in time for lunch.

“From the description we heard from the people who Hed, it sounded like a dust wight,” the wizard warned him. “They are extremely dangerous. If you see one, don’t try to stop it. Send for help.”

“If I need help, I’ll be sure to yell,” Leaplow answered with a grin. “But whatever it was, I think it is gone now. The City of the Dead seems as safe as always.”

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A few days later, Leaplow sought out his uncle Judicious in his workshop. The big man was setting the delicate clockwork of a spinning dial lock. His broad fingers never stopped their neat maneuverings but he nodded at Leaplow’s entrance.

“Quite a mess down in the south end,” Judicious observed. His wife and several other members of the family had been much more vocal about the damages done to some of Waterdeep’s most important monuments. “A few bruises on you too.”

“Nothing that won’t mend,” said Leaplow cheerfully, referring to himself and the tombs. After all, the repairs had started in the Hall of Heroes and he could live with being assigned to fertilizing the shrubs for the summer by Mycmaw. It was work that would give him plenty of opportunities to wander where he wanted in the City of the Dead. And he could always take a bath before heading to the taverns. Or he could stick to parts of Waterdeep where the ladies weren’t tussy about how a man smelled at the end of the day.

Leaplow thumbed through the sketchbooks and ledgers kept on a shelf above his uncle’s workbench. Happenstance’s

brown book was tucked between two account books detailing

recent lock orders. He pulled it down to prop it open against an iron vise.

He flipped the pages and found her picture in the exact center of Happcnstancc's book. That was why she'd looked so familiar when she'd first leaned over him in the tomb. As a boy, he had been as intrigued by this pictute as by the spell-created spirit that he'd met in the tomb.

The sketch displayed the curious quirk of her left eyebrow, and the edges of her mouth were curling up as if she was about to smile at the artist trying to capture the incredible mobility of her face. In the corner of rhc page, Happenstance's neat script simply spelled out "Ash."

"Lovely," remarked Judicious, leaning over Leaplow s shoulder. "I always thought Happenstance was a bit of a romantic, tucking that drawing inro the middle of his designs for locks and bolts."

"He never married, did he?"

"There's no marriage record in the house," responded Judicious. "But there's a story that Myemaw tells, one that was passed down in the family, that he walked away from Waterdeep on a fine summer day, heading north, and that he never came back. Who knows what happened to him after that."

"I wonder if he found her." Leaplow said as he closed the book gently and slid it back into its proper place on the shelf.

“So you think he went looking for that pretty fighter?”
Judicious mused as he returned to his lock.

“I’m sure of it,” said Leaplow. “It’s what I would do.”

But she was two centuries in the past, far away from Watctdeep, and he was here and now, marching through the courtyard of Dead End House to pick up a wheelbarrow of fertilizer fresh from the coffin-wagon horses and head back into the City of the Dead. Above him, the birds swooped across a cloudless sky.

Her spirit was gone and he had work to do, manure to spread.

tombs to repair, and any other odd job that the family could find for him to “keep that boy out of mischief as Myemaw constantly said. And after his tasks were done, he had places to go, ladies to kiss, fights to fight, and as many adventures waiting for him in the streets of Watctdeep as any man could hope for.

Leaplow Carver began to whistle as he trundled his wheelbarrow through the gate and into the City of the Dead. It really was a fine life, he thought to himself, working in a graveyard in the greatest city in the world.

The Many Murders of Manshoon

Ed Greenwood

westgate

9 Kytborn. the Year of Blue Fire (1385 DR)

The room at the top of the tower was getting very crowded. From where he was, on his knees amid the painful, spark-shot surges and blue, curling mists of the spell Manshoon had cast over the area—a spell not aimed at Feltantur at all. For all the discomfort it was imparting—Feltantur Norglaed could no longer see his foe.

Manshoon was now just a cold, satisfied voice coming from behind the growing army of undead advancing slowly and patiently toward Feltantur, in an ever-tightening ring. Most were skeletons clad in rotting or rusting scraps of armor and clutching darkened remnants of blades, but there were zombies enough to make several walls of flesh, and more than a few of the silent, grotesque horrors Norglaed knew to be shadows. Closer to him swooped and swirled several of the fell, tattered menaces that the living called wraiths.

Not that Norglaed needed to see the Founder of the Zhentarm to know his purpose in Feltantur's tower.

Manshoon was here to see him slain.

Not to lift a finger in the actual killing, for fear of tasting contingencies, but to command undead to do the butchery, as Manshoon's warding prevented his quarry from teleporting away.

And there was nothing Norglaed could do about it, no way out at all. He was well and truly trapped. He'd tried pleading for his life, invoking his continued usefulness to the Brotherhood—for Feltantur Norglaed was among the most

capable of surviving Zhentarim wizards—and had received in return only mocking laughter.

Out of breath, Norglaed was reduced to gasping, “Why ... why are you doing this?”

Pale lips formed a polite smile. “I am avenging certain members of the Brotherhood who are—thanks to your hands, Feltantur—too dead to take their own revenges. Such as Onselan Durkrcc, whom you murdered recently, and before that Councillor Uranthyl, not to mention Orm of Melvaunt. Quite a harvest, Feltantur Norglaed. You deserve to be painfully slain thrice, at the very least, but I am both merciful and in something of a hurry, so once will have to suffice.”

The silent undead all took a step forward, tightening the ring around Feltantur.

“Y-you’re in a hurry? Manshoon, in a hurry?” he gabbled, more to delay the final onslaught than to learn causes or reasons.

“Chasing you, Maerlhand, Dardhalow, and dW/’ngRhalovarr across the Realms will take more time than I care to spare just now,” that gentle, always-amused voice drawled from behind the thickest ranks of zombies. “If I can smite each of you without tiresome chases and public spell battles that will alert the others, my end of things can be more enjoyable. More efficient.”

“But Lord Manshoon, I struck down only traitors to the Brotherhood, those who—”

“Served me, Feltantur. Me, not Fzoul or priests of the Dark Raving Idiot or eye tyrants who put their own gain before all else.”

Fcltantur swallowed, then decided to dare much. “But— forgive me. Lord Manshoon—were not you doing the very same thing? Using the Brotherhood to benefit yourself first, and advancing those who put service to you before service to the Brotherhood?”

“If I had been, would their efforts and my scheming not have kept me alive? Putting me, as you claim, before all else? Yet it is not so—and, behold, my ears suffer the insults of such worms as Fcltantur Norglaed, who presume to know better the aims of the Brotherhood than its Founder! Bah! Enough trading crooked words with a lying murderer!”

The ring of undead lurched forward in a slow and silent wave, and a wincing Fcltantur Norglaed frantically worked a teleportation spell. The mists seemed to sear his hands as he worked, the symbols he traced in the air leaving Hamclike lines hanging in his wake, and—

He was abruptly and silently gone from the room, leaving skeletal fingers and rusting blades to claw and slice nothing at all. They swept through where Norglaed had stood. Space that was now empty, despite the ward that should have prevented all translocation magics from working.

Manshoon had been enjoying himself. Gloating, if one stooped to such a word.

After all. Dread Bane himself had approved of Orbakh of Wcstgac avenging his fallen self, of slaying those who’d had a hand in defying and then killing the Manshoon who had recruited them, led them—and been betrayed by them.

For too long had “Manshoon” been a name of amused mockery among priests of Banc, a word that set Zhentarim wizards to chuckling—even if only to themselves. For too

long had blunderers like Fzoul used the Brotherhood like a club rather than a deli and sharp dagger.

More than that, ruling Westgatc had become as tiresome as Orbakh had expected it to be, just as being a vampire was at once more and much less than ambitious evil men who yet lived thought it to be.

So he'd schemed, and waited, and the right time had finally come. Wherefore his long-planned settling of scores with the Zhentarim was finally underway. Until this moment it had gone so swiftly and so well. Lacrntcl Dunstonc, priest of Bane, had fallen first. Then the sneering Zhentarim mage Klarland Miir. Then that destroyer of vital Zhentarim members, Lorth Jaglamdur, Beholder Hunter Peerless and Puissant. The most expensive beholder hunter to be had in Athkatla. that one—but his fees were only fitting; he was, after all, the best.

They had died so quickly, so easily—and Manshoon, the once and future ruler of the Zhentarim, had not hurled so much as a single spell at any one of them.

As he'd told Lord Bane, "Overmuch reliance on spells has not served my earlier selves well. Rather than trusting in hurled incantations, I'll rely on wand, staff, rod, and chiefly on the undead I now control. They are many, their powers seem unaffected by this Spellplague, and not even the mightiest mage, working spells that remain utterly reliable, can hope to prevail against dozens of tireless, ruthless undead who suffer no pain and can be distracted by nothing."

He'd been right. With the Spellplague raging and wizards gone mad across Facrun, many dying as they helplessly spewed blue fire or lightning and most of the rest being twisted into strangeness by the affliction, with their spells

less than reliable and the skies burning an eerily beautiful blue by day or night ... it was the right time to lash out. At last.

And it had all been going so well!

So well that he'd let himself start to enjoy it.

Now Norglaed's escape had ended all that, wiping away his gloating in an instant.

Manshoon glared at his still-swirling mists and vainly-striding undead in flaring fury. Norglaed lacked the power to break such a ward, and indeed it still flourished before him. yet...

The conclusion was inescapable. The wretch had received magical aid from someone who'd been watching this confrontation ... but who?

Who could work magic he failed to perceive? Who could hide himself from Manshoon, even now?

The vampire who'd risen to rule Westgate spun around to glare into every corner and door arch, eyes like flames and detection magics arcing from wand to wand in his hands.

Yet the hidden remained hidden, and his temper did not improve.

Hefting the most precious treasure his minions of Westgate had seized, the skull-studded staff that commanded undead, Manshoon strode for the nearest door, restless to be slaying again.

Swiftly, now.

Fcltantut Norglaed would most likely flee far and fast, without a word of warning to any fellow Zhentarim.

Yet on the slim chance he did cry warning, it would be best to down his sometime ally, the Zhentarim mage Ghorstan Maerlhand, without delay.

Just then Maerlhand wearied of working spying spells and departed the gloomy cellar where he was wont to cast such magics, taking his usual route up through the citadel to the streets of Hillsfar, and the waiting hearthhouse that would furnish his usual evenfeast of sliced melons and cheese, washed down with dairy and the best Berduskan Dark. A route that led through the great hall of the old mansion, a statue-lined, dusty chamber now called the Hall of Silent Ladies.

The same room wherein an earlier Manshoon had created no fewer than four hidden portals, decades ago, to admit his stealthy slayers to butcher the owners of the mansion and seize it for the Brotherhood. Portals now unguarded yet still active, one on a high balcony and the others in various corners of the hall's large and irregular main floor.

Wherefore the four life-size statues of haughty ladies on their (all pedestals had changed subtly during Macrlhand's busy morning of spying on personages near and far, and during that same time skeletal undead had appeared, immobile in careful poses on the balconies, high ornamentations, and darkest corners of the hall, all of (hem holding various magic irems aimed wi(h exacting precision.

The heart of the room, specifically the door Macrlhand would emerge through and the length of hall he must then traverse to reach either of the doors that led to waiting Hillsfar. lay under the sway of those carefully-positioned rods and

scepters; their silent and invisible powers should slow Maerlhand and prevent him working any magic at all.

As Manshoon's little surprise unfolded to greet him.

Something Manshoon did not want to miss, though prudent fear of contingencies would relegate the actual slaying to undead under his command, while he merely watched. So he settled himself a trifle more comfortably against the unyielding stone bosom of a sculpted maiden who almost filled a small and lofty hanging balcony, and gazed down at a particular door.

Through which Ghorstan Maerlhand obligingly appeared, not seeming to notice two skeletal arms lift to train wands on the spot before the door as it closed in his wake. Wands that should stiffen any intruder into spell-held immobility.

Maerlhand seemed bored and irritable; he regarded the toes of his own boots more than anything else, as he trudged along muttering words that sounded less than gentle. He failed to notice flashes behind him as the false semblances of that pair of

statues vanished, revealing what Manshoon had put there—but did lift his head and blink as two flashes erupted ahead of him, and the other two statues revealed their new, skeletal natures.

Manshoon had replaced the statues flanking the cellar door with two ettin skeletons, and the other two with skeletons of an ogre and a gray render. The ogre and the ettins held huge clubs, and the render had its great hands. They stepped down from their pedestals with slow and smoothly silent menace to surround the astonished Zhentarim wizard, and prepared to set about clubbing Maerlhand to pulp.

Whereupon a ring on Ghorstan Maerlhand's left hand winked brightly, and the wizard flew up out of Manshoon's trap, to the portal on the balcony.

He stepped through that way and was gone, dark robes swirling, as Manshoon drew breath for his first curse of astonishment.

Again?

Shaking his head in disbelief, Manshoon swallowed the angry words he'd been about to snarl, and set about teleporting the four monster skeletons to where his next target should be taking tea in the uppermost room of her own tower, just then ...

After all, he had all the time in Paerun, but no time at all to waste.

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In some ways, it was easier to murder a Brotherhood traitor in the heart of her own lair than to confront her, say, out in the wildcrlands.

Ttue, she had all the advantages of fighting on intimately familiar ground, with all the baubles of magic she might have accumulated ready to hand. Yet it she used ward spells, and the murderer commanded magic enough to conquer and subvert those wardings without shattering them, her own protections

could be turned against her, and at a single stroke she'd become far less than naked and alone.

The four skeletons went in first, in the same box that had surrounded Maerlhand, and Manshoon himself followed, his

hastily-spun web of mastery ready and winking in its risen power.

Haela Dardhalow was just where he'd expected her to be, hands wrapped around the call tankard of steaming tea. Above it, her face was a lot less startled or frightened than he'd expected.

She sipped quite calmly, as his web mastered her wards. The magical fields rose and reshaped themselves under his command, and he allowed himself a sharklike smile and cast the spell that would prevent her using magic to defend herself.

"Greetings, Lord of the Zhentarim," she offered, almost cheerfully. "Someone missed one of your clones, I see."

"You seem strangely flippant," Manshoon remarked, as his four skeletons took a step closer, and three deadly clubs swung up into the air. "Or foolish."

"Possibly both," she replied briskly, setting down her tea and murmuring two words of power.

The first made her wards fall like curtains, dashed to nothingness despite his control, and the second shattered the eternals to shards of bone smaller than her slender hands.

Bones that rose into a grinding, tumbling wall of shards that swept past Haela's gently smiling face—she put out a hand to cover the open top of her tankard—to engulf the gray render and the ogre.

They shuddered, slumped, then rose again as ... more shards, grinding and shrieking against each other as the larger cloud turned, rose, widened ... and swept right at Manshoon in a great grinding, stabbing wall.

“You can still work magic,” he murmured, shaking his head.
“What is it that I can’t see? Who is it?”

Haela’s laughter, from behind the wall of bones, had a high, singing quality that told him she’d worked a telcport that was claiming her. “Hcsperdan warned me and aided mc,” she informed him. “I’d say you have real problems, Lord of the Many Selves!”

Manshoon worked his own teleportation, and departed, seething.

These younger Zhentarim had no respect for their ciders, who could so easily destroy them. None at all.

What good is working tyranny, if none of your underlings fear you?

Yet again, why should they, when all the world knows you are one of many clones—most of which have been destroyed?

Yethtra Malandcr was well aware some in the Brotherhood regarded her as a weapon Manshoon forged against Fzoul, and others thought her unshikably loyal to Bane, Fzoul’s leash and harness to control Manshoon. She also knew full well that the Manshoon gathering her into his arms—a vampire, no less—was not the Manshoon she had so ardently loved and served.

Yet, somehow, none of that mattered. When their eyes met, the old fire was there. She loved this Manshoon as deeply as ever, and felt honored that he used no charm of his vampire self to ensnare her.

Just that crooked smile she loved so much.

She had opened her arms to him, and more than that, shivering in pleasure that no lover had brought her since “her” Manshoon had perished.

She knew he intended to use her, just as the Manshoon she had known so well had used her. Pawn, lure, and spy, these roles she was used to, and expected.

So it had angered her not at all when he murmured his commands, as they lay entwined together in sighing aftermath.

She had eagerly agreed to everything, suggesting refinements where she saw opportunity, and had been rewarded with his lopsided smile or surprised delight she knew of old, the one his face wore so rarely.

He’d not tell her everything, of course. He never did. That was mere common sense, not mistrust or rebuke. What one did not know could not influence what one did. and Manshoon had always played along the sharp edges of such subtleties.

Yes, this was her Manshoon, to the hilt. So to speak.

Wherefore she lay bound to a couch by metal fetters at throat, waist, and ankle, short chains silenced by interwoven strands of soft cord and hidden by the great drapery that covered her bare body.

Not to protect her modesty, but to hide the tattoos the first Manshoon had personally spell-seared into her skin over too few years of commanding tenderness; markings that held magics ready to burst forth at her will, or when touched and certain words uttered, or when blood touched them. They would be the death of a wizard of the Zhentarim Manshoon wished dead.

An elder mage mysterious and feared in the Brotherhood, one called Hesperdan. As sly, patient, and manipulative as the Founder himself, an aging, smiling survivor who walked alone. Not someone trusted by Manshoon—for in the Brotherhood, “trust” was equated with foolishness or madness—but someone long respected.

Why her new Manshoon now wanted him dead was none of Yethtra’s business, and nothing she wanted to know. She was to welcome and embrace him, then use all her harmful tattoo-magics, and see that he died in her arms. Perishing beyond contingency magics or other means of rising from death.

She suspected her new Manshoon would aid her in that, for there were things she could not accomplish chained to a large and unfamiliar bed of opulent design, holy servant of Bane

covered with deadly tattoos or not, when facing an archwizard. Yet until then, Manshoon was hidden elsewhere. Watching over her, she had no doubt.

She lay alone, save for the skeletons. All in gleaming, matching plate armor, full-helmed, their bones hidden behind expressionless blue-polished steel, naked long swords in their gauntleted hands. Two score, ranged shoulder to shoulder along the walls, everywhere except where there were doors. Utterly silent, utterly motionless. She was alone, a pearl in an oyster, the bait in the trap.

Despite the rumors her new Manshoon had set racing through the Brotherhood, she did not expect Hesperdan to be her first guest.

She had long been not just the Lord Manshoon’s lover, but his most effective personal agent. After his fall, she’d taken

her own revenges among those who'd betrayed him or failed to support him strenuously enough. Wherefore she was hated by many in the Brotherhood. Oh, there would be visitors, if only to gloat.

Her new Manshoon thought so too; they were why the armored undead were here.

Manshoon had spread word among the Zhentarim that he had returned, captured and imprisoned his "deceitful" lover Malander, and was now holding her helpless here, awaiting his justice. She had thus far, his rumors insisred, refused to divulge a secret he very much wanted to learn. Something about Hcsperdan; just what, she had not yet said.

Thus, the trap. She smiled.

The door swung open, propelled by an unseen conjured hand. Yethtra's smile widened.

It was a minor wizard, one of last summer's ambitious magelings, grown overbold because he'd managed to live this long. A preening man, sporting a spike of a beard on the very point of his chin, one Torel Pereglar.

"Aha!" he said now, in wary triumph, the wands in his hands having ascertained she was the only living being in the room.

"Aho," Yethtra Malandcr purred. "Well met, Torcl Pcreglar."

It was his turn to smile more broadly, as he dared to take one step into the room. "You remember me," he observed, unnecessarily.

“More than that, Torcl,” she murmured. “I welcome you. Lord Manshoon’s magic holds me bound here, but he is away—until after dawn tomorrow, if the magic he’s using works as it usually does. Which means, should you not offer me harm by blade or spell, for I am protected by the Founder’s magics, we could ...”

She arched one eyebrow meaningfully.

“Oh, I’ll not be caught quite so easily as that, little viper of Banc,” the mageling replied. “I’ve heard of your... markings.”

The unseen magical hands he commanded drew the drapery slowly aside, baring her.

She preened, posing to entice rather than to hide herself as he looked her up and down, his eyes growing hungry and his smile less and less nice.

“Yes,” he sneered. “Had I dared come to bed, you’d have slain me with some of those. As it is, I prefer to remove you from the ranks of the Brorhcrhood at last. Not by spell or hurled blade, but by—this.”

Torcl Pcreglar stepped back out of the room, and in the same smooth, swift gesture drew something from his bosom that twinkled with a stasis spell. It was a long-fanged snake, and he Hung it as he murmured the word that would end its stasis.

One of Yethtra’s tattoos flashed, and the snake was gone before it had time to uncoil.

Gone into the gauntlet of a guard flanking the door, who turned and tossed it into Pcreglar’s face.

The undead on the other side of the door strode into the passage far enough to catch and crush the snake, and thrust it back into the breast-folds of the still-kicking wizard, who was

now purple-faced and foaming at the mouth. The guard opened a side door in the passage, dragged the dying wizard into the room behind it, then closed the door again and resumed his place. Both he and the guard who'd thrown the snake fell back into poses matching all the other guards, as if they'd never moved at all.

Two other Zhentarim Yehrra knew not at all came to see her, one to slay and one to rut. They shared Peregilar's fate.

Then came an older man in mottled beige robes, who had a face her new Manshoon had spell-shown her.

Hesperdan.

He smiled at her from the doorway and asked gently, "Are you going to show me the trap, or are we to dance first?"

Whereupon a hail of skulls, bones, and ponderously-striding zombies came out of nowhere behind the old wizard, slamming into him in a hail of undeath that drove him staggering into the room—where he vanished under an onslaught of armored guards that broke apart twice in brief spell bursts that (lung shards of armor and bone around the chamber, before he fell atop Yethtra Malandir.

Embracing him with all her strength, she thrust herself against him and triggered her tattoos as fast as she could spit out the words of magic.

She'd managed to discharge seven of them into the shuddering body in her arms before, quite suddenly, all I-

acriin went away.

The smoke reeked of cooked Yethtra, though he doubted there was enough left of her, Hcsperdan, or the couch to tell the ashes of one from the other.

Which was just as Manshoon had planned. Such intermingling would dash most chances of Hcsperdan returning from the dead, and the spells he would cast on these smoking ashes should vanquish the rest.

A pity he'd had to spend Yeihtu Malandcr to work this trap, but everything has a cost...

Manshoon stepped over some twisted, blackened heaps of armor plate and peered into the smoke. No, there was nothing one could recognize of the couch at all. Small wonder; he'd hidden more than a dozen scepters, orbs, and rods within it□ and caused them to explode all at once.

"Farewell. Hesperdan. Such a pity you couldn't resist the most obvious of traps, in the end." he murmured, raising his hands to begin the long series of spells that would make certain the old wizard was destroyed.

Unsurprisingly, the smoldering ashes made no reply.

Rhalovarr Racventar was a mockery of all elegant, sardonic Brotherhood mages. A misshapen, mumbling man, he lurched through life sharing his every deed with many tiny eyeball beholdcrkin dwelling beneath his garments. They sucked on him to draw the vitality they needed, leaving his skin a ruin of outthrust, oozing blood-sores.

With Hesperdan gone. Manshoon had dared to gloat at last, openly standing guard with rods and scepters ready to prevent his (oe rrom using magic□as Manshoon's small

undead army appeared through his conjured portal to slay Rhalovarr Racventar.

A wraith and several skin kites came first, swooping and flapping, followed by a reaper leading two stiffly-striding death-locks, a few blasphemers, and a swarm of bone rats. Behind them all rose a fell and fearsome boneyard.

Only to melt away under the force of a ravening spell so bright and fierce that Manshoon fell back, aghast, his own undcath shriveling and wavering.

He continued to retreat, slack-jawed in disbelief at the source of that great magic, as the rest of his undead melted away before it.

A gently-smiling Hesperdan had stepped out of Manshoon's own portal—and translocated himself, in the wink of an eye, to stand protectively before the cringing Raeventar. Whereupon he'd calmly hurled back all of Manshoon's flurry of spells, right at their source!

Raging, the once and future Lord of the Zhentarim had fled them and him, racing wraithlike through dark and unfamiliar places that were warmed only by the heat of his curses.

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Orbakh had found this place long ago. A cavern beasts and spying wizards alike shunned because of the wild, crawling magics a decaying, buried mythal spun through it. Someone bold enough to fare ahead through the darkness discovered those strangenesses raged only in an outer ring, around dark, deserted tranquility. A fine place to be alone to think—or fume.

He had done both, and come to a grim conclusion: He had slain Hesperdan. So this new “Hesperdan” must be someone else.

And the only mage he knew who was mad and magically powerful enough to work such an impersonation was that old and meddling Chosen of Mystra, Elminster of Shadowdale.

So he must set a Hesperdan trap that would lure and destroy Elminster.

Which meant the bait must have something to do with Mystra. And a certain Manshoon too.

He thought for a long time, strolling idly in the darkness. Then he stopped, nodded, and smiled a slow, soft, and unlovely smile.

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Word had spread among the Zhentarim of the latest excitement. The last clone of Manshoon had been found!

A rogue priest of Bane who desired to defy Fzoul and the I Cyricistshad the spellbound Manshoon in the Chamber of Spells \$ Guarded, and was keeping it there, asleep and imprisoned, for 1 a very good reason.

Few of the younger Zhentarim knew precisely where the I fabled Chamber was. beyond “deep beneath the earth, some-I where north of Zhcntil Keep but south of the Citadel of the I Raven,” or how to safely gain entrance to it, but everyone in I the Brotherhood knew what it was: a deeply buried, strongly 1 warded spellcasting vault prepared decades ago by beholders, I to contain runaway magics as Zhentarim experimented with 1 ever-stronger spells.

The “very good reason” was the real excitement: Manshoon’s last body was being kept asleep and imprisoned because it had been discovered that the god Azuth had placed a relic of Mystra— that yet lived—within it.

This news made Zhentarim eyes widen and Zhentarim lips whisper excited speculations aplenty.

For everyone knew this much: something was bound to happen, and it wasn’t going to be pretty.

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The hard part hadn’t been getting the body. Any recently slain human male of roughly the right size who wasn’t yet visibly rotting would do, and the Moonsea offered no shortage of them. Transforming the corpse into a semblance of himself had taken merely a few careful spells.

Introducing a cluster of magical scepters and rods into the hidden interior of the body, all ready to blast outwards, had been briefly messy, but not particularly difficult.

Binding the corpse and placing it in a chalked circle in the center of the floor of the Chamber of Spells Guarded was simplicity itself.

Perching various undead around the room to hold and aim a small arsenal of other magic items, all pointing at the body and ready to blast it, was slow and exacting work, but not particularly difficult.

No, the hard part was the waiting.

Manshoon had long ago settled down in a dank, dark, cramped guardpost inside one of the huge, hollow stone pillars that flanked the entry door of the Chamber of Spells

Guarded. Sipping a fine vintage of Aglarond's blood wine, of course—he cradled one of the strongest magical weapons he'd ever found in his lap. Lifting it from time to time to unleash it out through the guardpost firing ports at unwanted visitors.

Of which there were fewer than he'd expected. Surviving Zhentarim were either learning prudence, or sinking deeper into fear. He showed no mercy to those who did appear, using the rod to flay their minds.

The fearsome rod only affected minds that could wield magic. It made them fear any spell they sought to cast would leak throughout their minds and harm them more than their intended targets.

They fled, shrieking or gibbering, and Manshoon felt himself growing bored. Then, quite suddenly, the waiting was over.

Hesperdan strode straight into the Chamber of Spells. Guarded, smiled up at all the trained and waiting scepters, rods, and worse, and went to the body lying in the circle.

Manshoon quietly let himself out of the guardpost and stepped into the Chamber, to bar any attempt at escape.

Then Hesperdan lifted a hand that grew fire, and sent it at the sleeping Manshoon.

The storm of blasting, ravaging magics erupted, with Hesperdan caught at the heart of it. As the old wizard staggered.

sank down, and started to shift in shape, Manshoon allowed himself to gloat.

Elminster was well and truly caught, and at least gravely wounded!

Then, in mid-mirth, as the spell storm peaked and started to fade, Manshoon stiffened into silence, peering into the flickering, dying heart of all the destructive magics.

The semblance of Hesperdan was quite gone, but the pain-racked, shuddering figure now groaning and straightening did not look like Elminster at all. Rather, it seemed to be ... Manshoon himself!

Could it be? Could another of his selves been masquerading as Hesperdan all along?

Sudden blades of magic stabbed into Manshoon from behind, thrusting deep into him and snatching the mind-ravaging rod from his hands. He watched the rod cartwheel away through the air, disintegrating in puffs of red flame as it went.

Airborne himself, he gasped in anguish as a force as firm as the current of a strong stream whirled him around to face his attacker.

He found himself gazing into the cold blue eyes of Elminster.

“Wrong again. Founder of the Zhentarim,” the Old Mage said mildly, unleashing a spell that leaped at Manshoon like a roaring wolf of flame. It washed over him in a fury, stripping away his wardings and all the rings and other magics he wore in one long, searing surge. “If ye were even half as clever as ye think ye are, ye could be truly dangerous, ye know?”

“But how?”

“D’you think you are the only one who can wear a different shape?” demanded a cold, raw voice from behind Manshoon. Magic promptly whirled him around again to face it.

His duplicate was gone, and in its place stood a tall, skeletal figure with withered gray Hesh, eyes like points of twinkling white fire, and a head orbited by tiny glowing gems. “Larloch?” Manshoon gasped.

The figure nodded, bony fingers crawling like spiders through the air, spinning a spell Manshoon had never seen before.

It promptly slammed into him, soaring up his nose and through his eyes to dance its rage through his head, searing away all recollection of some of his spells.

“Abandon your scheme to slaughter those of the Brotherhood until you destroy Szass and regain control of the Zhentarim,” Larloch told Manshoon. “or we will destroy you. Instantly. Right, Zulkir of Zulkirs?”

Manshoon found himself spun around again. Elminster had become Szass Tarn of Thay, wizened and dark-eyed and darker robed.

“Yes,” Szass Tarn agreed, with a cold smile. He waved a hand as skeletal as Larloch’s, and a row of dark portals opened like eyes, in the Chamber where such craftings should have been impossible.

Out of them flew bonebats, followed by a shuffling legion of skeletons, zombies, and shadows. “Abandon your scheme to slaughter even one Zhentarim more, from this moment forth, or we shall destroy you. Swear it, and accept this spell, or our patience will end, and with it ... your existence.”

Manshoon eyed the unfamiliar magic now swimming forth from Szass Tarn's fingers. It reached out to crackle around the Lord of the Zhentarim in a ring of roiling green-and-yellow fire.

"What is this?" he hissed, staring at those flames.

"A binding. If you break the promise you will now make, your very blood will begin to melt your flesh and tissue. A final death, a deliverance from undeath. as rapid and horrible as it is inescapable."

Manshoon closed his eyes, then sighed, and managed a smile.

"Very well. I swear before and by all the gods there be that I am done hunting Zhentarim and former Zhentarim from this moment on. If any die by my hand or magic, it will be because they have come hunting me."

"We hear," Larloch said from behind Manshoon. "Done. Now go."

Szass Tarn's binding tightened around the vampire, then sank into him. Staggering under its weight, he turned slowly to regard the lord of many liches, lofting an eyebrow.

"Freely?"

"Freely, if you attempt no sly dispelling." Larloch replied contemptuously. "Elminster agrees to this also."

"I do indeed," the Old Mage said from behind Manshoon, who didn't need the magical twirling of his body to know that Szass Tarn had disappeared, and El reappeared. "Get ye gone, though, ere I stumble or slip and accidentally smear yc from here to Mount Waterdeep."

Manshoon snarled silently and went, opening a portal and fleeing through it the moment he was outside the Chamber of Spells Guarded.

Elminster waved a hand, and the door closed firmly, leaving him alone with Larloch.

Whose shape promptly dissolved back into that of Manshoon himself, and then shuddered, melted, and became Talatha Vaerovree of Innarlith.

"Hail, Magister," Elminster said gravely. "Last Magister to be."

"Not for much longer," she murmured, staggering forward to embrace him.

As they met, she gasped, "Father, I feel very ill. A great emptiness inside me, and ..."

Abruptly she spewed blue fire onto the floor, and collapsed in his arms. "I've never felt anything that pained me as much as this."

"Nor have I," Elminster told her grimly. "Ye've done well, and made me very proud, ye and all of thy sisters. I play Szass Tarn as I please, but playing Larloch must have cost ye much, to get his permission."

"No," she whispered, eyes leaking fire now. "Not much at all. He is as scared as all of us, as this fire on high ravages all. The Lady we all honor; she is ... is ..."

"Is no longer as we knew her." Elminster said wearily. "Leaving all our spells less and less reliable, and trying to keep Manshoon clones alive long enough to play Hesperdan

with them over and over again no longer worth the peril, even for my daughters. Which is how Yhclbruna came to die playing Hesperdan in one of Manshoon's earlier nasty little traps, and why I gave Alastra, Ardanthe. and Yusendre other work to do instead of playing Hesperdan. Ye insisted too strenuously to gainsay, and look what it got ye."

"Tell me one thing, Old Mage," she hissed with sudden fierceness. "Why we must play such games? Why not just blast every last Manshoon that awakens, one alter another, until they are all gone? Why humor them?"

"Latha. dearest," Elminster murmured, daring to feed healing fire into her through the hands holding her up, "long ago I promised a certain Lord of Zhentil Keep—a man of honor—I'd not strike Manshoon down. As the centuries pass. I have kept my promises, as much as I can; if I do not, I am nothing, and all my work is tainted. More than that, Holy Mystra bade me not rid this world of Manshoons, and I obey her above all others."

"Even now?" she hissed, fresh fire spilling from her lips.

"Now. with magic wild all around us and those who work it going mad or worse, destroying Manshoon—all the many Manshoons—would loose bindings and unbind undead and leave warded things of magic undefended. Causing even wilder chaos and destruction; the last thing the Realms need."

With a sudden grunt of effort, Elminster lifted Talatha and carried her to the door, only to stagger before he reached it, almost drop her, then hastily set her down, breathing hard.

"If ye go back," he gasped, "and look at the last of the clones Khelben and I remade into dear dead Hesperdan's

likeness—now there was a foe who knew what honor was, and walked cloaked in it, all his days—ye'll find the flesh now melting from the bones like wax, as undeath creeps through them all. That game is over."

"So is mine, and my life with it. Old Mage," she whispered, blue tears now flaming down her cheeks. "Farewell... Father!"

"Farewell, daughter mine," he said hoarsely, starting to cry. "Ye played well."

"'X/hereas you," she breathed, "broke all the rules. Defending Fae. jn, and us all, thereby. Kiss me; I don't want to die alone."

He did, and managed to keep his weeping silent until the woman in his arms was quite limp and dead.

A Body in a Bag

Erik Scott de Bie

silverymoon

25 Elf int. the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

"We're dead." Korvo pressed his empty hand over his eyes.

"Not us" his companion replied as she kneeled over the body, thumb against her lips. "He, on the other hand ..."

The black walls of the crypt loomed over them and the ceiling felt oppressively close. Carven demons with faces lined with age-cracks peered out of alcoves in web-crusted corners. The place smelled of mold and rat spoor—smelled like old, rotting death. Outside the circle of muddy light, the darkness crouched like a stalking cat.

Korvo held a lone candle, shaking fit to cover his hand in half-melted wax—it stung, but heat never quite bothered his kind.

What did bother him was the body.

The candle just illuminated the unfortunate lordling—his face drawn tight with skin like butchered pork, his eyes like glass balls—who had followed them into the crypts.

"We're dead, Ande—don't you understand?" Korvo tugged on the horns that curled from his forehead, as he often did when nerves assailed him. "Dee-ee-dee—dead."

"Again: no. And mind the A'." She brushed a lock of liquid black hair from her eyes and felt at the corpse's neck—a gesture made moot by the hole torn in his chest. "Now Doln—Doln is very dead."

Korvo smiled wryly. A well-to-do lass born of respected parents—even one as clever as Ande—could never understand the sort of peril Korvo, a tiefling, had known during his short, ‘fiend-touched’ life. This ... well, this was quite perilous, even for him.

Ande looked raptly at the body and Korvo followed suit. The lordling was a little older than the two of them, and while in life he’d had handsome, noble features, the ghouls had made short work of those. Korvo felt dizzy, and that spoke volumes for a lad who subsisted on bone and gristle.

Korvo’s quicquickness regarding death made being hopelessly in love with an apprentice necromancer... difficult.

Ande was prodding the body, clearly fascinated. “And it isn’t as though we killed him.”

“Might as well have done.” Korvo was already envisioning the scene before the magistrate: her clad in black and pleading, him wrapped horn to tail in chains (adamantite, to keep the “beast” at bay), their accuser turning bright red as his finger jabbed at them and spit flew from his mouth. Korvo shivered. “Doln followed us down, which sounds much like we ‘lured him to his death.’ And with who he is—”

“Sir Doln Moorwalker.” Ande said. “Heir of Everlund, long bloodline, yes, yes. I just don’t see what all the fuss is about—I’m sure the stories of High Lord Kel’s brutal reprisals are exaggerated.”

That was one of the things he admired about his best friend, Ande Rygis: her uncanny logical optimism in the face of sheer illogical doom. His heart was going to pop. “Exaggerated? Exaggerated’.”

Ande shrugged off Korvo's hysteria. "Living folk always exaggerate—it's their nature."

She prodded at the corpse's eye, which slid out of the socket like the pit out of a rotting peach. She caught the eye and pushed it back into the face.

A whine started in Korvo's throat, and he slapped a hand over his mouth to keep it in.

"Although," Ande said, adjusting the eye in its socket. "I'll concede that you have seen more magistrates than I have ..."

"We're going to be hanged? His throat was like parchment. "At best."

Ande tapped her black-painted lips thoughtfully. "You think so?"

"We killed his son, Ande!"

"One of his sons—he still has Pelnus." She smiled wanly. "Who's more handsome anyway ... and strong... and brave ... and"

Korvo's stomach whined, as it always did when Ande mentioned Pelnus Moorwalker. Pelnus had seen eighteen winters—two more than Korvo—and he possessed the heart of the dark-gowned lass who now sat lost in fantasy dreaming of his qualities. They would marry come spring, unless a miracle should happen and Ande chose Korvo instead.

This had been his purpose in tagging along on her fool's errand to the crypts in the first place: spending as much time as possible with her, hoping that inspiration would strike and teach him how to win her love.

He'd had until the end of summer, when Pelnus returned from his first ranging, and as the snows melted, that had seemed simple. Now, as autumn was approaching and the leaves were turning red, he wondered where all the time had gone. His hope looked as dead as poor Sir Doln at their feet. He looked up at the carved demons on the surrounding sepulchers, hoping they would swoop down and end his misery.

No such luck.

"This is good," Ande said, clicking her lacquered black nails together and smiling. "Hardly any major damage at all."

Korvo offered a mild curse to Beshaba, goddess of misfortune. You lovesick fool! he thought.

Why couldn't it have been one of the girls who practically threw themselves at him every day? Why not Risscn the dressmaker's daughter who adored him. or Balga the fishmonger's niece who saved the best morsels for him, or even the High Lord's grandchild Liscttc, who wrote him poetry? One day he could be High Lord Korvo the Fiend-Touched. Master of Luruar, Scourge of the Northern Realms.

And yet. all his charm and glibness faded around this girl—this gloomy, unfathomable daughter of a knight of Amaunator and a mage of the Spcllguard. This girl, who was sworn to another and had never seemed to notice her childhood friend with the red skin, the horns, and the occasional brimstone smell.

His fiendish charms meant nothing to her—which meant, of course, that he loved her terribly.

"What ..." He looked away, teeth clenched. He had to ask. "What damage ... is there?"

Ande counted on her fingers. “Ear, nose, part of the scalp—hair, of course—part of his face ...”

“Ugh.” Korvo’s stomach turned over again. Worse that it was just parts, not the whole.

“One foot, three fingers, and”—she pressed her fingers into the hole in Doln’s chest—“and a number ol inside parts. None vital, though. He’ll fill up quicker, but oh well. Let’s see ...”

“No, that’s all well,” said Korvo. “Let’s—let’s just get away from here. As far as possible.”

They could run away together, he thought. Run away to Ncsme or as far as Waterdeep, where no corpses of lordling

knights could ever bother them again. Or at least not corpses they’d helped make.

A speculative look came over Andes face, and for a terrible heartbeat he thought she could hear his thoughts. Then she nodded down at dead Sir Doln.

“Korvo,” she said, “I can fix this.”

” ‘Fix this’?” Korvo jerked a thumb at the corpse. “Lass, rhe man is dead.”

“True.” Ande turned to her satchel in which they’d packed their highsunfeast—which Korvo had no intention of eating (or possibly any meal ever again)—spare lantern oil, a coil of rope, and—

“Oh no.” Korvo’s head starred beating again. “You mean the book again, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Ande pulled from the satchel a plain cloth sack about big enough for Korvo’s head—or at least, so it seemed on the outside. When she opened the drawstrings and reached inside, her entire arm disappeared into the depths. “Now cease your pattering and help me look. It’s in here somewhere.”

“Gods.” His foot was indeed tap-tap-tapping like the heart of a terrified rabbit. He stilled it, but the other started going. No use. “We’ve had enough of that book for a tenday.”

She paused and glared at him. “It would have been better if you hadn’t come up with such a stupid, inane, and wholly uninteresting question to ask.” She rooted through the bag. “I drew the sigils, spread the ashes, intoned the ritual, and what—you couldn’t think of a fair question?”

“Gods.” Korvo shuddered at the memory. “But—but—the corpse rising from its sarcophagus—the dead face contorting hideously with new life! Its red eyes burning the depths of our souls!”

Ande rolled her eyes. “ ‘Twas a simple ritual for speaking with the deceased,” she said. “I already explained this. The dca> are harmless.”

“Harmless?” She could say that now, absent the desiccated fac and the sickly white fingers reaching for his throat... he swallowc< the nightmare visions. “Well. What was I supposed to ask?”

Ande pursed her lips. “A long dead sage of ancient times from before my great-great-grandmother was even born,” sh said. “And you ask ‘How about that weather!’”

“Hrm. Well□” Korvo looked into the darkness, hoping the gargoyles would prompt a suitable response that didn’t make him sound craven.

The gargoyles were not forthcoming.

“Here!” She pulled from the bag a bulbous skull and tacked it down the center. Her face fell. “Hmm□not quite.”

“Ugh.” Korvo touched his queasy stomach. “Why do you carry that around?”

Ande looked at the skull thoughtfully, her red-black eyebrow drawing together. “I don’t know, to tell you true,” she said. “It’s not as though it’s useful□or even human.”

“Not... not human?”

“Bugbear.” She tossed the skull over her shoulder, where it shattered loudly against the floor.

“Ah!” Korvo cried at the sound. “Someone might have heard that!”

“Someone?”

“Something*.” he said. “What if the ghouls come back? With reinforcements? Or their necromancer friends? Eh? What do you say to that!”

The dusty darkness seemed to swirl in response, and Korvo froze on the spot, shaking.

Ande sighed. “Truly, you are the most craven tiefling I’ve ever met.”

Korvo almost didn’t respond, shocked by her use of “craving with the deceased,” she said. “I already explained this. The

dead are harmless.”

“Harmless?” She could say that now, absent the desiccated face and the sickly white fingers reaching for his throat... he swallowed the nightmare visions. “Well. What was I supposed to ask?”

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and "tiefling" in (he same phrase—and the images it conjured in his head of her and him and a bed. "Aye," he managed.

Ande looked at him dispassionately. "What are you so afraid of?"

"The dead eating me?" Korvo pointed at the corpse. "Like poor Sir Doln here and oh my gods'." Lungs heaving, he shrank into the wall, searching the limits of the faltering candlelight. "What was that?"

Ande rolled her eyes. "Ofttimes, I wish you were more like Pel. Her face took on a dreamy cast. "He has a proper stomach and would not fall to pieces at every odd smell."

"Aye, that."

Korvo also ofttimes wished he were like Pelnus Moorwalker, but more for the young knight's betrothal to Ande. And the looks. And the coin Pelnus stood to inherit. And—honestly—the courage.

“Ah!” Ande pulled forth a thick book bound in black leather. An inset skull stared out from the cover, seemingly carved into the leather with lines of magic that glimmered faintly in the light. They reacted to Ande’s touch and grew brighter as she held the tome. “Here we ate.”

“How will that help us?” Korvo asked. “What are you going to do, make him talk? We were here when he died. Mostly. We heard them, anyway.” His stomach quivered. “I mean—not at all. No, we weren’t here, Sir Magistrate. Ahem.”

Ande flipped through the libram—each page of which sent a little puff of dust into the air as it turned—and settled on a page covered in ancient script Korvo didn’t know. “Here we are,” she said. “Raising the dead. Let’s see ... ah. I have everything we need.” She smiled. “I told you I can fix this.”

“Are you sure about that book?” Korvo said. “Would Kelemvor approve?”

She waved the question away. “This book was penned for another god of the dead—Myrkul, a dark god of the old world,” said Ande. “But honestly, the powers are the same—just the purpose is different. Just like the church, just like this book.”

“A dark god?” Korvo said. “I’m not sure—”

She sniffed. “Good and evil are just words, Korvo—they don’t have any meaning outside of power and what it’s used for.”

“Tell that to him,” Korvo said, eyeing Doln’s corpse. “Methinks he’d agree that fussing around with the dead’s a touch closer to one than the other.”

“Good and evil—peasant talk.” Ande rolled her eyes. “Now help me find the blood of a sanctified virgin, won’t you? I’ve a vial here in my bag somewhere.”

Later, Ande sat cross-legged, the book across her knees, Korvo kneeled in the center of the sigil drawn in gray chalk, his cheeks dappled with salt and blood, his hands on the chest of the corpse.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” he lied.

He could definitely believe it. Ande could tell him to jump down a pit marked “Death” and he would do it. Probably. Maybe he’d look first.

“You’re perfectly safe,” Ande said. “Just so long as you don’t distract me.”

He eyed the five black wax candles anxiously. “What happens if I distract you?”

“Probably painful, horrible death.” She looked at him, irritated. “I could drain too much of your life-force and that would leave you worse off than him.” She nodded to the corpse.

Korvo shut up and let her chant in peace.

At least she’d agreed to take the soul energy from him, rather than from herself. “In case aught should come to pass,” he’d said, trembling in terror and hoping she didn’t see it. For her part, Ande had shrugged indifferently. The ritual was what mattered.

And completing it will make her ever so grateful, came an unwelcome voice—his father’s voice, actually. Who knows what a woman might do when she is pleased?

This was Korvo's inner devil, and whether it was his imagination or an actual legacy of his father's corrupted blood he did not know. The fiend spoke often—usually suggesting he lie, cheat, or flee—and usually Korvo didn't listen. Usually.

The devil had been silent regarding Korvo's decision to power Ande's ritual, but now that he had made the choice, it filled him with insidious suggestions of iniquities to come—visions of how a certain dark-haired beloved of his might reward his courage. Korvo's growing blush had less to do with necromancy at work than these dreams—and, he confessed, a bit to do with the sight of Ande at her casting.

Seeing her now, caught up in the ecstasy of her magic, Korvo was almost glad he'd come along on this nightmare. Her cheeks were flushed and her voice excited as it spoke words he did not understand—her black-dyed hair rose with a ghostly breeze and her teeth seemed to glow faintly in the candlelight. Her eladrin heritage—from her sun elf father, he knew—glowed on her face.

Gods above and below, he thought in awe.

He felt it then—a piercing cold in the pit of his stomach, as though he'd been jabbed in the belly with an icicle. The unearthly chill radiated outward. Korvo, accustomed to heat more than cold, shivered and opened his mouth to cry out.

Just as quickly the cold passed. His limbs sagged and his vision swam. He might have fallen over were it not for Ande's touch on his shoulder, giving him new strength.

Then Sir Doln's arm jerked against his knee. Korvo watched Doln twitch and roll around as though struggling to rise after a deep sleep. He made little guttural noises that sounded like “fuh” and “nyah.”

“Did...” Korvo whispered. “Did it work?”

Ande’s expression was opaque. “Recall when you said, ‘in case aught should pass’?”

“Aye?” Korvo said, plagued by a growing suspicion of unease.

“Well□” She tapped her black lips with her fingers. “It seems aught did.”

With a horrible screech, Doln rose and pounced on Korvo. The ticfling cried out and fell, flailing.

“It’s a ghoul, by the way,” Ande said, seeming unflustered. “Don’t let it□”

Korvo slammed to the floor and the ghoul perched spidcrlike atop him, its tongue snapping back and forth like a whip. Icy fingers and nails parted the flesh of Korvo’s belly like knives. The face, pale green and horribly distended, thrust into Korvo’s and Doln’s bloodshot eyes rolled freely.

“Feed!” it wailed, like a desperate child. “Feed!”

The attack came so fast, so violently, that Korvo could not react. The creature’s claws ripped into his midsection, numbing him instantly. He tried to cry out as it tore at his shoulder, but only moaned. The ghoul’s touch was paralyzing him.

Ande’s voice remained calmly instructional. “And try not to let it bite□”

The ghoul sank its teeth into Korvo’s shoulder and the world spun wildly.

Ande declaimed words of power, and magic slapped the creature from where it perched on the (idling to crash against the wall. Korvo tried to rise, but his shoulder blazed and

He wrenched back to the world, terrified and panting.

He'd lost consciousness. The blackness had seemed to last only an instant—and yet he might have been dead to the world for far longer. How long... ?

A cry startled him from his stupor—Ande's cry.

Heedless of his still-blurry vision, Korvo jerked up to one knee, hand searching for the hilt of his sword. His head slammed heavily into something, sending it reeling away.

He caught hold of something soft, and the fact that it didn't bite him told him it was Ande. At first he saw her only as a hazy black vision, surrounded by wisps of shadow and spattered with scarlet. Then, when his eyes cleared, he saw her standing there still as death, one sleeve of her black dress torn free, and her arm showed welts and marks of teeth. She was staring forward, seemingly through him.

Korvo's heart jerked to a halt. What had the ghoul done to her?

Then Ande clutched his arm so hard he yowled in shock and pain. She hadn't been paralyzed—merely concentrating. "Fascinating," she murmured in his ear. "Just look at it move, Korvo! Have you ever seen anything so wonderful? "

"Wonderful" was not the first word that sprang into Korvo's mind regarding the ghoul. The creature flopped about on the floor like a fresh-caught fish, grasping its ears as though in

pain. Blood trickled from fresh puncture wounds in its forehead.

Korvo remembered hitting something with his head. His horns were sticky with cool blood. "Fancy that," he murmured. "Feed!" the ghoul whined, shaking itself. "Feed!" "Amazing," Ande said with excitement. "What durability it has!"

Inspiration struck Korvo. The image of the ghoul cradling its head and his own aching scalp gave birth to a cunning deception so ludicrous as to seem foolproof.

She loves the ghoul, his infernal father said flatly. So use it.

Korvo might have protested, but this suggestion came so clearly that he could do little but bask in wonder at its brilliance. For the first time, he replied to the devil inside.

Thank you. he thought.

There's a hoy. Somewhere inside him, his father was grinning.

"Korvo!" Ande cried. "What are you aware!"

The ghoul dashed Korvo to the ground and sprang toward Ande. She raised her hands, words of magic on her lips as the creature flew at her. A fan of pitch black flames seared from Ande's fingers and engulfed the ghoul's arm. The creature fell back, crying out and waving its fiery limb madly.

Korvo looked down at his untouched arm and followed the voice's devious suggestion.

"Ah!" he cried, grasping his arm in mock pain. "It burns!"

Ande, who had been staring at the ghoul, looked bewildered at Korvo.

The tiefling mirrored the ghoul's motions and cried out again. "What happened?" He poured great feeling into the theatrics. "I feel its pain? What?"

Ande blinked. "The ritual," she said, inspired. "The ritual must have bound you to it!"

"Uh?" he said incredulously. "I mean—yes! That must be it."

Perfect. It was working!

"Hold fast," Ande said. "I have a plan."

"Oh. Thank the—"

A growl cut him off. The ghoul's ravenous eyes fixed upon Korvo's flesh and its twisted lips curled back from its teeth. "Oh," Korvo said.

"Feed!" The ghoul cried as it pounced.

"Ande!" Korvo caught at the ghoul's grasping fingers, trying to twist them away. "Help!"

"Patience." Ande was unfurling the bag from which she had fished out the tome of Myrkul. "If I'm right, it can't hurt you without hurting itself."

"Aye, well." He should have seen that coming. "That's all well, then!"

Korvo caught the ghoul's head in two hands and strained to keep the gnashing jaws away from his nose. Its tongue lashed his

cheeks with blood—his own blood, he realized—and he knew that (he phantom pain was about to become real pain.

“Whatever you’re about, lass—make haste?”

“Ah!” She drew out the black book, then set it gently on the floor.

“Not that book again—ewk!” The ghoul’s tongue lapped against his lips and he gagged.

Calmly, Ande left the book where it lay and opened the bag again.

“Magic, Ande!” Korvo shouted. “Magic, not a bag of—!”

Ande threw the bottomless bag over the ghoul’s head and pulled it downward. Instantly, the creature was swallowed up, leaving only its feet protruding. They kicked and flailed until Ande finally shoved the ghoul inside the bag and yanked the drawstrings tight. She tossed the bag to land lightly next to the tome of Myrkul, where it lay still.

“What did you do that for?”

Ande looked nonplussed. “If hurting it hurts you, “she said, “then logically I had to incapacitate it without harm. It doesn’t breathe, so it should be fine in there.”

The bag thrashed around on the floor like an injured rodent and emitted a “nyah!” sound. Then it lay still once more, as though considering.

Ande’s gaze was fixed upon Korvo’s face, and he reveled in the scrutiny. His outlandish trick was working—now that she thought him connected to the ghoul, she couldn’t take her eyes off him.

Ignoring all the wounds and the corpse smell, he counted this a victory.

“We’ll take it back for study, so I can find a way to break the curse.” she said. “But where?” She chewed her black-painted lips. “Not my place—my mother and father never understand. Ah!” Ande grinned triumphantly. “Your bedroom, I think.”

Huzzah. ‘shouui! a hundred shining knights in Korvo’s head, raising their swords to the sky.

“Let’s away then,” Ande said. “I’ll need to study you in great detail—study the curse, I mean.”

“Curse? Oh. Of course.” He grasped his stomach then nodded at the twitching bag. “But, um, won’t it—and I, being cursed and all—won’t we get hungry in there?”

“Unlikely.” Ande shrugged. “I keep all my supplies in there, including a number of parts.”

“Parts? “he dared to ask.

“Disembodied limbs, eyeballs, tongues, ears ... enough for him to sup well enough for a while.” She nodded to the bag. “We’ll see what to do after that.”

The bag thrashed on the ground, releasing muffled “fuh!” noises from inside, then gave a purr that sounded disturbingly content.

“Ugh,” Korvo said.

In his dream, lirs raged around Korvo as he stood high on a mountain surrounded by legions of fiends. Wings and daws and horns and tails rose to honor him. and he saluted his

armies with a black iron scepter flanged with blades that pulsed with tiny bolts of lightning. A crown of flames rose above his head, and he spread his mighty wings ten paces in width.

“Today, you foul and worthless creatures,” he boomed in a voice that belonged to a body even greater and more demonic than his amazing physique. “Today, we storm the tower of the idiot Lord Moorwalkcr who so smugly peers down his nose at us. Stride forth! Leave none alive!”

The fiendish creatures cheered—scaled barbazus raised bloody claws in praise, lithe succubi blew him kisses, and great pit fiends bowed to his call. Korvo gave an unearthly cry that

could have shattered mountains, and his scepter pulsed in time with his excited heart.

“But wait. Lord Devilborn,” said an alluring voice at his side.

“Who dares?” he declaimed.

Before him stood a woman wrapped in black silks—a diaphanous, tattered gown that clung to her every curve and revealed more than it hid. Her crimson hair flared around her like living flame. She was beautiful and terrible and his for the taking.

“Mercy for my lord!” And the death-witch knelt at Korvo’s mighty feet. “My dark powers cannot defeat your majesty! I will give you anything that you ask, only spare Pelnus!”

Korvo smiled. “You, then, my lady,” he said. “You are my prize for mercy. Do you consent?”

“Why... why of course. Great Lord.” Ande’s smile smoldered and she licked her lips. “In truth, I am relieved—Pelnus is just so unworthy ... and so stupid. And poor in the bedchamber.”

“What a surprise.”

“Oh please take me now, dcmonlord!” Her clothes burned away like paper and her hands traced her slim, perfect body. “How I burn for you!”

“Naturally,” he said, shaking loose his perfect mane of hair to show his glorious horns.

She pressed herself tight against him, whispering the promise of great treasures in his ears ...

Then he realized he was gnawing on something—his teeth crunched on bone—and he looked down confusedly to see Ande’s arm in his mouth. He tasted her flesh, and it was good.

“Oh, my lord!” Ande cried.

Korvo started awake from his dream, sweat streaming down his face. His heart was hammering and the taste—that sickly sweet taste and texture yet on his tongue.

A body stirred on the bed next to him—an arm slithered along his chest.

“Oh,” he said. “Sorry I woke you, Andc. Just a nightmare.”

She made a sound against his belly like a purr—half of pleasure, half of hunger—and he felt a sort of gnawing pain in his middle.

“Ande?”

Her face rose from his torso, lips smeared with tiefling blood, tongue lolling, eyes shot with red and bugging out at him in terrible lust.

“Feed!” the ghoul cried.

Korvo started awake from his second dream.

He was leaning against the wall of his darkened bedroom, clad in a white shirt that stuck to his dark reddish flesh. He panted in the hot, muggy air and tried vainly to repel the saturating reek of decay that filled the room. Something had died and was rotting in this place, and he hoped to gods it wasn't him.

He realized he was not alone—something heavy was leaning against him.

Slowly—trembling—he glanced across.

Beside him sat Ande, fully clothed, propped against the wall, a red leather book open on her lap, her head perched on Korvo's arm where it had fallen in sleep. Beside her on the floor rose a stack of tomes: Kandigar's Reanimaiion, Tales ofMiltiades, Guide to the Walking Dead. Also there was the black tome of Myrkul perched on the edge of the bed. She slept like the dead, he thought, and only the slightest stir of her beautiful chest indicated she was breathing.

He reached out to check by touch as well—just to be sure—then thought better of it.

Satisfied that she would not spring to unlife and start eating him—and trying to forget the taste of her dream-self's flesh—he focused on the sensation of her head against his

arm, and how her touch sent little shivers through his insides. His arm was numb, but he didn't much care.

Well? His inner devil asked. She's right there. Act.

What? No!

She burns for you, the voice purred, does she not?

Heart thudding, Korvo considered this.

Tragically, just as he was about to rouse her from blissful sleep with a righteous (or devilish) kiss, the sackcloth bag in the center of the floor started rustling. Smacking sounds—as of fangs on flesh—emerged from the bag, and Ande stirred. She looked up at him confusedly, and Korvo realized he had one instant to say exactly the right thing to make her love him.

Instead, he said. “Well met.”

“Did I doze?” Ande sat up and pressed a hand to her forehead. “Oh, I must have.”

She smiled awkwardly at Korvo, and he thought Tymora must have smiled and given him a second chance to say the right thing. Then came that gnawing sound and her gray eyes flicked to the bag on the floor, which had flipped over in its occupant's rustling. “Oh,” she said. “Best see to that.”

Thrice-damned luck!

Missed opportunity. His inner devil smirked.

Ande scooted away, rose, and stretched. He tried not to think about her queen of darkness self, though it was

difficult not to in view of her gorgeous back. If only she'd lose the dress. ...

He looked instead at the book she had discarded in rising and gaped. "My Unlife and Times?" he said. "By Szass Tarn—the Szass Tarn?"

"Probably fictional." Andc rolled her eyes. "Far too romantic. I mean—the dead just don't do that."

Andc opened the bag and the ghoul climbed out—first one arm, then the other, then a head. It hit the floor, skittered away, and looked around dazedly. Its clothes were mostly gone and blood—some red, some blue, some green—covered it head to clawed foot.

The ghoul's mad eyes went first to Korvo, then Andc to linger and hold. Its toothy mouth curled. Then it sprang at Korvo.

The tiefling sucked in breath for a cry, but the creature flew out of its leap, blasted by a bolt of force from Andc. The ghoul crumpled against the wall with a disappointed Teh! sound.

"Korvo?" Andc looked at the tiefling expectantly—dubiously. "Arc you?"

"Oh." Korvo remembered and curled himself into a ball of feigned, shared agony. "Oof!"

Andc gave a yelp and hurried over to his side, kneeling on the bed and touching him gently. "I'm so sorry—I forgot. Are you well?"

“Not to worry—almost forgot myself.” He did his best to act hurt, which wasn’t difficult—he’d had plenty of experience with the real thing. “The binding’s still there, eh?”

Ande looked over at the ghoul, which had backed against the wall, hissing at them venomously. “Hmm.” she said. “There seems to be a delay of some sort—the pain takes a heartbeat to pass to you.”

“Aye.” Korvo resolved to remember that. His head was starting to ache, trying to keep it all straight.

“I was reading all night, trying to find a like case.” Ande shrugged. “Nowhere do the texts speak of a sympathetic bond between a living person and an undead creature.”

“Bother,” Korvo said. Mystery was helpful in his cause. It would keep her interested.

Ande pursed her lips. “Of course, if Lord Doln were a vampire—well, that would be different.” A queer hungry look came into her eyes, and Korvo had to wave to get her attention. She looked back at him and blushed prettily. “Ahem. We’ll have to do aught about that.”

The ghoul’s glittering eyes followed a rat that had scurried into view. The rodent approached, nose sniffing, but the ghoul did not move—it sat still as death. Just when the rat was about to flee, the ghoul snaked out a foot and crushed the hapless creature between its toes. The ghoul’s tongue lolled out of its mouth and it passed the dead rat from its feet to its hands. Then it paused and looked to Ande courteously.

“Feh?” the ghoul asked.

“Urn,” she said. “Urn, go ahead.

The ghoul beamed and thrust the half-dead rodent into its mouth. It crunched wetly.

“Fascinating,” Ande murmured.

“I think”□Korvo clutched his belly□“I’m going to be sick.”

At just that moment, his door shuddered under a fearsome knock. “Korvo!” came a deep feminine voice from outside. “Korvo, are you in there!”

Gods burn his eyes. His mother.

“No!” he shouted back, then winced. “Hold a breath!”

He noted with relief that Ande had already started moving□ specifically, she had plucked up the bag and was holding it out for the ghoul, which scrambled away along the side of the room.

“Get in the bag,” Ande commanded.

The ghoul stuck out its tongue at the bag.

“In the bag!” Ande snapped.

“Korvo, I’m using my key now.” There was a sound of metal scraping.

“Wait, Mother!” Korvo cried. “I’m coming!”

Ande reached into the bag and drew out a skull with a sigil burned into the forehead. Korvo recognized it as the same symbol on Myrkul’s tome. “Ande, I don’t think□”

Heedless, she brandished the skull. The grisly talisman's empty eye sockets lit with green flames.

The ghoul hissed at Ande, then dived into the sack. Its momentum knocked Ande staggering back into Korvo's arms and they flopped onto the bed together.

At that moment, the door opened, admitting Korvo's pear-shaped mother, Goodwife Korbin. Her eyes widened when she saw them entangled on the bed.

"Oh," Korvo said, a whole lot of Ande in his arms. "Mother."

"Son." She crossed her arms and raised one eyebrow. "Good morrow, Ande."

"Good morrow. Goodwife Korbin." The girl smoothed back her hair, seeming quite calm. Korvo saw the bottomless bag clutched behind the small of her back. "A pleasant morning to you."

"And to you." Goodwife Korbin looked suspiciously at her son.

In a drunken stupor, Goodwife Korbin had bedded a tiefling scllsword named for the queer polearm he favored in battle, who had left her with an amusing name for his child. Hence Korvo of Korbin.

"Mother, this—" Korvo said, terrified that she would demand to see what Ande was hiding behind her back. "This isn't what it looks like."

"For shame, boy!" Goodwife Korbin put her hands on her hips and smirked. "Really, it's about time," she said. "I'm just glad you two finally got to the tumble."

“You think she means the fight with the ghoul?” Andc whispered.

“Urn.” Korvo felt heat rising in his face.

“Could well have picked a worse lass-friend,” Korvo’s mother said. “Have done, many a time.”

“Oh,” Korvo said. “Oh no. You—you’ve got it wrong.”

“Hark, though—Andc, are you not engaged to the noble

‘elnus Moorwalker?” asked Goodwifc Korbin. “Korvo tells me ill the time about—oh.” She laid a finger alongside her nose and winked.

“Mother!” Korvo’s face felt even hotter than before and he hought his head might explode—or his horns start trailing moke, at the very least.

“Your father was quite the ladykiller in his day,” she added. I counted myself blessed by the Smiling Lady to have caught him when I did.”

Andc shrugged, totally confused. “Your father killed women?” he whispered to Korvo. “Did your mother escape? Or did she lefcat him in some sort of duel?”

“Er,” said Korvo.

“Well. When you’re done in here, come down right away, rhey’ll want to speak with you.”

Andc and Korvo looked at each other again.

“Who?” Korvo asked. “Who’s ‘they’?”

"The concerned mob of Silvaeraen outside, a'course," she said. "Along with your parents, Ande—something about a vision 'our mother had?"

"Not again!" Ande moaned under her breath. Then, when Goodwife Korbin looked at her dubiously, she corrected: "I mean—what sort of vision?"

"Something garish—a ghoul or sommat?" She looked around speculatively.

"Your mother has visions?" Korvo whispered below his breath.

Ande looked very pale. "My mother is a paladin of Amaunator, and something of a seer besides," she whispered. "Not that she can control her auguries, but they've come true often enough in the past."

Korvo sighed. "So we're starned, is what you're saying."

Ande shrugged. "Don't worry—I can fix this."

Korvo cursed again. "That's what you said last time—just

before the moaning and the biting and—" He glanced at his mother, whose eyebrows had risen almost as high as her widow peak. He finished in a whisper: "And the death!" "Undeath," she corrected.

The bag chose precisely that moment to thrash wildly, and Ande—who had tucked it under her hindquarters for safe keeping—started up with a "meep!" quite as though Korvo had goosed her.

Goodwife Korbin looked at them curiously for five heartbeats—during which neither Ande nor Korvo dared to

breathe—that pointed to the bloody stain on the floor that had been a rat. “Set that you clean that up too. I’ll make some morningfeast for you and your lass-friend after you see to our guests.”

And with that, she winked at Ande and disappeared back down the stairs.

Ande rose and stepped toward the door, but Korvo seized her hand. She looked down at him curiously, as though he had done something very odd.

“We’ll do this together,” he said.

She nodded, her eyes steely and determined.

Hand in hand, they went down the stairs.

The magic bag remained on the floor, forgotten for the moment.

After a few breaths, it thrashed about experimentally. The unsecured drawstring came a bit loose, and a single ghoulish finger poked through the mouth of the bag.

“Nyah?”

Korvo and Ande went down to meet the gathered folk, who—the tiefling was displeased to note—toted sharp implements

and torches. It was a bright day, so clearly the torches weren’t for light. In addition to a score of concerned neighbors, near a dozen knights clad in shining silver-plated steel stared balcfully at Korvo.

At the head of the mob stood Lady Amalia Venkyr and Irievalor Rygis—Ande’s mother and father. The red-haired

Amalia looked stunned to see her daughter emerge from the Korbin house, but Irievalor just shook his head ruefully.

Worst of all, Korvo saw Pelnus Moorwalker standing near the back. He was older and dustier than when Korvo had last seen him and he wore a scraggly beard, but the tiefling would have known him just from his stunned expression at seeing his betrothed hand in hand with another man.

“Goddesses of fortune deliver us,” Korvo prayed.

“I can fix this.” Ande stepped forward. “Well met!”

They regarded each other in shocked silence—the crowd with their fire and rusty steel and the girl with her dyed hair and jet black lips. Ande gazed over them, the wind catching a lock of her shoulder-length hair and teasing it about her face. How beautiful she looked to Korvo—and terrible.

He wondered if this was how one felt moments before a good lynching.

“We’ve come for the ghoul!” came a cry from deep in the crowd, and cheers of “aye!” and “huzzah!” met the call.

The silence broke, and whatever spell Ande had woven with her appearance quickly unraveled in a din of voices. Korvo felt the cold fingernails of doom scraping slowly down his back and heard Beshaba’s giggles.

“What do you have to say for yourself, young lady?” asked Amalia. “I’ve had a vision of a loathsome ghoul attacking you. What is the meaning of this?”

Ande looked around at the gathered villagers, then raised her chin. “Korvo is—uh, he and I have been—uh—” He could

practically see her mind racing for an explanation.

“We know what you’ve been about!” shouted a villager.
“Don’t try to hide your foul misdeeds!”

The Lady Amalia stiffened and whirled around, silencing the cry from the crowd.

“Well, daughter?” she asked, trembling at the answer to come. “What have you been about in this place? Speak true, Aryande. and we’ll not be angry.”

Ande looked down at her hands, her cheeks turning bright red.

Korvo clasped his hands and begged Tymora to grant his friend luck in finding some excuse—a story that would not lead to his destruction at the hands of furious townsfolk.

Then Ande straightened and squared her shoulders, looking for all the Realms exactly like her mother the knight. “Very well,” she said. “I shall tell you all here the truth.”

She paused, gathering the attention of the crowd.

“Korvo and I ... have been making love.”

Gasps ran through the crowd, and Amalia’s eyes widened to twice their size. “What?”

“Yes,” said Ande. “It’s true. Korvo and I are lovers—and we shall be wed next summer!”

The villagers looked at one another, dumbstruck. That was hardly the answer they had expected. “But,” came a voice, “but what of those marks on your arm—are those teeth?”

Gasps rose.

Korvo couldn't breathe.

"Nay—that is, we got a little rough," Ande said, pulling her torn sleeve down over her arm where the ghoul had bit her. "But just the lovemaking—nothing vile or necromantic or anything. Honest."

The looks were dubious.

"Oh, and I may be with his child," Ande added.

Korvo wished, in that moment, he could be like the ghoul and not need to breathe—or that blood would not rush into his head and threaten him with white spots in his vision.

The villagers looked at one another, shrugged, and brightened with smiles. They came forward—not to attack, but to congratulate.

"About time, lad!" one of the men said, and "Well struck indeed!" said another. Another man murmured, "Next summer, eh? Let's not be too hasty."

Amalia looked petrified and Irievalor chuckled, looking not a bit surprised.

Men slapped Korvo on the back while women crowded around Ande, giggling and gossiping. In truth, neither was used to the attention and Korvo thought Ande looked just as lost as he felt. Somehow, he pushed through the crowd of well-wishers and extended his hand toward Ande. She took his hand in her own—oh, her fingers felt so warm—and clasped tightly.

He glanced across at Pelnus, who was staring at them as though they had just run over his favorite pony in the street

with a cart full of manure ... which had also spattered him. Korvo realized that Ande had not seen him. "Oh no."

Pelnus cast one last lingering glance upon Ande, then turned and walked off, looking far older than he had but a moment before. Korvo felt a surge of pity in his heart. At that moment, Ande turned and saw his backside—color drained from her face and shock entered her eyes.

Korvo knew what he had to say, though this time he'd not have wished for it.

"All's well, lass," Korvo said to her. "All's well—we'll tell him the truth. He'll believe us."

Ande looked at him for a long moment, eyes wet, then threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you," she whispered.

This won the approval of the crowd, who cheered for the happy couple, completely oblivious as to the true reason for the kiss—

—And to the creature of ravenous evil that perched above them, glaring down and salivating.

Even as he tried to think of nothing but Ande's gentle warmth pressed against his chest, Korvo felt the skin on the nape of his neck began to itch. He looked up toward his window and saw Sir Doln perched on the shingled roof, greenish spittle dripping down his lengthened incisors.

"Gods," he murmured, and his body froze.

"What?" Ande whispered, clutching him tighter, and Korvo turned his eyes skyward. She saw the ghoul, who bared its

fangs as if in challenge, then turned to creep off along the roof toward the north.

All the glorious warm nuzzling was done now, and in Ande's eyes Korvo saw that deadly purpose he had seen in the crypt below. "We have to go," she said.

"Right." He gave her another squeeze—for appearances, he would later claim—then released her. She turned to face the crowd, arms raised.

"Hark, all!" Ande shouted. "Your congratulations and fair words are most welcome. But my betrothed and I have ... If you'll all just... pardon us!"

She pulled him through the crowd of smiling faces, quite confident they knew the true reason for their hasty departure, and they hurried after the ghoul.

Korvo and Ande followed the roof-bound ghoul as best they could from below, but they lost it. They paused in the streets of Silvermoon, gasping for breath and gazing about wildly.

The tiefling could see his companion's face losing more and more of its color, and she clenched her hands so tight as to draw blood with her dyed nails.

Good a time as any, he thought.

"Ande," he said. "I have to tell you something."

"Can it wait? We have to make sure that ghoul is safe until I can break the curse. If someone hurts it or worse ..."

"Well—"

He was about to tell her the truth when they heard a cry of shock from an alley nearby. Ande ran first, and Korvo was close behind.

There, half a dozen paces ahead of them, the ghoul had sunk upon someone—Pelnus. The young knight was fighting back valiantly as the claws scraped at his armor.

Korvo clenched Ande's arm. "Strike it hard," he said. "Worry about for me!"

Ande nodded sharply and hissed the words to a spell—black fire erupted from her hands to strike the ghoul from behind, skittered off Pelnus and crouched against the wall, hissing.

Freed, Pelnus coughed and struggled to move—the ghoul's analysis, Korvo recognized—and Ande rushed to his side, clinging to her knees and patting at him, reassuring him that he was well.

A hiss drew Korvo's attention to the ghoul, and he reached down for his sword—only to find that he'd left the house in a hurry but his underclothes.

"Don't worry!" Ande called as she knelt over Pelnus. "It'll only hurt itself if it touches you!"

"Actually," Korvo said, "I should probably—ahh!"

The ghoul lunged and it was only an instinctively raised arm that saved Korvo's face from the ghoul's bite. The powerful jaws closed on his forearm. Pain ripped down his arm, which went numb instantly, drenched in paralyzing spittle. Darkness crept into his vision, inviting him to sleep ...

"No," he hissed. "No!"

Blood flooded his arm from the bite, and he choked through the horror to launch a blow straight into the side of the ghoul's head. The creature gave a frustrated mewl and fell off him, allowing Korvo to push himself to one side, hand grasping about for

Pelnus's sword. Ande had drawn it from the knight's belt and sent it skittering toward Korvo.

Korvo grasped the hilt and rose, a confident smile on his lips, his blood roaring. But the foul thing was shambling toward Ande where she kneeled, trying to wake Pelnus.

"No!" Korvo cried, surging to his feet, blade drawn. The ghoul's poison was working through him and time seemed to slow. "Ware!"

Ande turned her head and froze, dumbstruck, as the ghoul scrabbled for her soft face.

Blood splattered her but she did not flinch, even as it dribbled into her eyes. The ghoul's face hissed and mewled, inches from Ande's nose. Its yellow claws creased her smooth cheeks.

Then the creature gave a hollow, dry cough, spewing up more blood, and its undead body jerked straight as a rail. Then, with a sad little moan, it slumped down to dangle limply on the sword that had plunged into its back. It twitched like a stuck boar.

Then the ghoul fell aside along with the sword, revealing Korvo. He fixed his gaze on Ande, smiled, and slumped to the ground. The world roiled and Korvo could hear laughter.

Beshaba's laughter.

The alley went black.

Pelnus stared at their savior as he fell to his knees before them. Korvo's eyes rolled back in his head and he sank to the ground, senseless before he hit the cobbles.

"No!" Ande hugged Korvo's head and covered his face in kisses. "Korvo! Korvo!"

Pelnus got to his feet and stood over them both, shaking his head.

"I ought to tell you," Pelnus said after a breath. "He's going to be well."

Ande paused in lavishing affection and weeping. "What?"

"Those look like mere scratches." Pelnus pointed at the rents in Korvo's arm. "More blood than anything."

"Oh," Ande said. "Oh no—you don't understand! His soul is tied to the ghoul. A ritual that we did—it bound their life-forces together. And now that it's destroyed, he's... he's..."

"Going to be well," Pelnus said.

Someone squeezed her hand.

"Unfortunately," Korvo murmured.

Ande looked at the miraculously alive tiefling, at a loss for words.

The world came back.

Korvo lay in the gutter, covered in ghoul and human blood, and sighed. Ande's arms were wrapped tight about his neck, and her tears wet his checks. He could die happy right now,

if Lady Luck chose to take him—and spare him what was coming next.

He didn't hold out much hope, however. Pelnus had spoken true of his injuries—it was only blood loss and the ghoul's touch that put Korvo on his back—not a curse at all, much as he longed for a curse.

But nay, he was going to be well. "Unfortunately," he murmured.

Korvo sat up and took Ande's hand. Oh ye gods, this would be awkward.

"I don't understand," she said. "You—what?"

"Well—" Korvo looked over. "First—do we have to duel?] You know, for the lovemaking bit?"

"Oh, no," Pelnus said. "I reasoned it was a trick and played 1 my part." He grinned. "Improvised."

"How did you know it was a trick?" Ande asked.

Pelnus pointed at Korvo. "He was there."

"Aye," said Korvo, rolling his eyes. "Tiefling. Right." He looked farther down the alley. "Er—"

"I'll just—aye, that." Pelnus stepped aside and leaned against] a wall, averting his eyes.

Ande was staring at Korvo, completely bewildered. Awkwardly, he got to his feet, helped her up, then fell to picking at his muddy, bloody undershirt. "I wonder what mother's going to do about these stains."

"You," said Ande. "You're alive."

“Aye.”

“So you weren’t bound to the ghoul.” He spread his hands.

“Why would you say that?” Ande demanded. “I was scared most of the way to death!”

Don’t do it, his father’s voice cautioned. The truth ever hurts. : “I” Korvo hung his head. “I lied to you, and I’m sorry.” Idiot.

“Accepted.” Ande crossed her arms. “But I’m more interested in the why. Why would you deceive me into thinking that ghoul had a connection with you—into making me bring it along and forcing us to spend all that time together trying to figure out how to solve a problem we didn’t even have?”

“Well...” Korvo looked at Pelnus, who smiled wryly. Clearly, he understood quite well what Korvo had done and why, and from his eyes, he didn’t blame Korvo one bit. Smug bastard. “Can we speak alone?”

Ande gestured away. “Pel, would you?”

Pelnus’s eyebrows rose. “Of course, my heart. I” he said scratching at his beard. “I have aught to tell you, but it will wait.

He touched Ande’s shoulder and looked past at Korvo as if to say, “Tymora smile upon you.” Then he left the alley.

Ande and Korvo stood gazing at one another, just a few paces from the rotting ghoul. Decay seemed to grasp it tighter now that it was no longer animate, and it turned to little more than withered bone and putrescence in the span of breaths.

"Pelnus doesn't seem bothered," Korvo said, "that his brother became a ghoul—which I then killed."

"I don't think he recognized him," Ande said.

"Oh." Korvo put his hand to his forehead. "Oh ye gods."

That would be yet another awkward conversation.

A moment of silence passed, in which Korvo held his breath

"Korvo?" she asked, her voice very soft.

You know what's coming, his father's voice told him. You know

"Yes?"

"Let's be straight with one another," said Ande, meeting his eyes.

"Yes." Korvo squared his shoulders, ready for what she was surely going to say. He would no longer hide it. "Let's be that
"You lied to me about the curse," she said. "I did."

"And I've seen how good you are with a sword," she said.
"Yes. Wait—what do you mean?"

"Don't bluff me, Korvo," she warned. "I know what's going on. Of course she does," said his father.

"Of course you do," he murmured. "How could you not?"

"So let's not play." Ande grasped his arm, keeping his eyes locked. It brought them closer together, until he could feel her warm breath on his lips. "Tell me true."

"Yes," he whispered. "Anything, Ande."

“Down in the crypt,” she said. “If you’d meant to kill the ghoul, you would have. Instead, you purposefully kept it intact, because you saw that I liked it.”

She has you, m’boy. Might as well stand firm.

“Aye,” he said. Then, more confidently: “Yes.”

“Well.” The corner of Ande’s mouth quirked up. “How about that?”

Korvo opened his mouth to speak, words bubbling up. “I—”

Ande grinned triumphantly. “I knew you loved them too.”

“I love—” Korvo faltered. “Eh? Them?”

“The undead, of course!” Ande hugged him tightly. “Ooh! Why didn’t you tell me sooner! We could have been capturing animated corpses to study for years.” She drew away and beamed at him. “I’m delving the crypts again tomorrow after next—promise me you’ll come!”

“Urn—I will?”

“I knew you had some Orcus in you.” Ande kissed him on the cheek. “You’re such a good friend!” Then she skipped after Pelnus.

Korvo stood speechless in the alley—his mouth half-open and one finger raised to make an unspoken point. He was totally and utterly at a loss.

The devil inside chuckled.

iruladoon

R.A. Salvatore

somewhere in icewind dale

Spring in the waning years of the Post-Spellplague

"We're not going to get there in time!" shouted a frantic Lathan Obridock.

He turned back from the prow to regard his fellow fishermen, his face wet from spray as Larson's Boneyard bounced across the considerable swells on the always unpredictable Lac Dinneshtre. His teeth chattered, both from fear and from the brutal cold of Icewind Dale waters, lakes that spent more than half the year covered in thick ice.

"Young Lathan, be at ease," counseled Addadearber of the Lightning, a rather colorful and flamboyant resident of Cacr-Dineval, the boat's home port on the western bank of the great lake, one of three that defined this region about the singular mountain known as Kelvin's Cairn. "I'd not have sailed with Ashclia Larson there if I thought she'd lead me to a watery grave!" As he spoke, Addadearber waved his arms dramatically, but the effect was much less so than usual, since he had abandoned his red wizard robes for garments more practical to sailing. Nothing could pull a man to the bottom faster than

water-soaked woolen robes, after all. Addadearber still wore his floppy black hat, though. Once conical and pointed, standing tall and straight, the hat was bent over halfway to its apex, its point leaning to Addadearber's left-hand side, and its once stiff brim sagging on both sides. It seemed a fitting reflection of the aging wizard, with his gray hair and bushy gray beard, crooked posture, and with his magic, too, rendered unreliable at best and often impotent by the fall of Mystra's Weave, the great event known throughout the Realms as the Spellplague.

“You’re old and don’t care if you die, then!” accused the youngest member of Boneyard\ crew, Spragan Rubrik, at fifteen almost two years Lathan’s junior. His long curly brown hair dripped water from every lock, but it seemed obvious that his darker brown eyes would have been wet with moisture anyway, as he had been the first to discover the leak in the fish hold, the cold, dark water of Lac Dinnesherc creeping in to claim her prize.

“I’d watch my wagging tongue, were I speaking to Addadearbcr of the Lightning,” advised Ashelia from the middeck tiller, her tone decidedly less dread-ridden than that of the two young fishermen. Nearing middle age and quite sturdy for her gender, the broad-shouldered Ashelia was still a quite handsome woman, with straight blonde hair, sharply parted on the right, hanging to her shoulders, and light gray eyes shining. Her skin retained the texture and look of porcelain, unlike the other veteran fishermen, with just a hint of a tan showing so early after the end of a particularly deep winter.

“He’s hoping the old warlock will turn him into something that can swim, then,” quipped the fifth man from under the low-pulled hood of his forest green cloak.

“A toad is my preference,” Addadearbcr replied. “And ‘tis true that toads can swim. How far is another matter, particularly given the size of the knuckleheads we’ve been pulling in for two days. I would take bets that the poor little laddie wouldn’t

Śaddle ten good kicks before a ten-pounder got him. What’s our guess then, Roundie?”

The cloaked man just chuckled softly in reply, both from Vddadearber’s teasing description and from the use of his

nick-lame. He was known about Ten-Towns as Roundabout, because it always seemed to be exactly that. "Roundabout and never lerc," was the phrase often spoken regarding the ranger, whose real name few knew, and which he never seemed willing to share. Sic was of medium height and muscular, but slender, with long, straight black hair and piercing eyes, one brown, one blue—a trick, it was rumored, of his mixed heritage. His ears were quite long, and poked through his hair. He didn't try to hide the fact that his veins coursed with elf blood.

Spragan turned his alarmed expression to Lathan, but the older boy just shook his head and brushed the blond locks from in front of his blue eyes.

Addam began to whisper something then, something that resembled the incantation of a spell, and both young fishermen turned to regard him with great alarm, which of course turned the corners of the old wizard's lips up in a satisfied grin.

"Enough of that," Ashelia said to him. "Them boys're scared enough." She turned a severe look upon the two of them as she continued, "I'd have thought they'd been out on the waters enough now to know that a little leak isn't sending Boneyard to the grave, especially me sister's own Lathan there, sailor blood and all—not that ye'd know he's got any blood in him in looking at his face just now!"

"We've never been this far—" Spragan started to protest, but Ashelia cut him short.

"And enough from yerself!" she scolded. "Four generations of Rubriks been sailing Dinncshire, and ye've a grandda, an aunt, and two uncles who call the Lac their eternal resting

place. I took ye on to train ye, for the wishes o' yer ma─both of ye!

Yc think they'd have trusted me with the lot o' ye if I didn't know the waters? And ye think I'd take ye out as full crew if I didn't think ye ready for it? So don't ye prove me wrong here. Lathan, yc stay up front and get yer sounding rope ready as we near the eastern shore, and yersclf, Spragan, grab a pail and get to the hold."

"There's too much─"

"And don't ye make me tell ye again, or I'm knowing a way to drop a hundred and fifty pounds from our weight real quick."

With a last look to Lathan, Spragan scurried away. They heard him stumble down the aft stairs then splash about in the watery hold. A trapdoor near the taffrail popped open, and after more splashing, Spragan flung a bucketful of water up and out, to splash into Boneyard's wake.

"Should I go and help the lad?" Roundabout asked.

Ashelia waved the notion away. "We've picked up the eastern current already and we're not so far. Yc paid me too well for ycr transport to the eastern shore for me to make ye work yer way across. Now regarding the old spell-thrower ..."

"Bah, but you employ me to find fish, not throw water," Addadearbcr replied. "I suffer your pittance of coin that I might glimpse your beauty, but there arc limits to even your considerable charms."

Ashelia's forced grin and subdued chuckle revealed that the woman knew sarcasm when she heard it─yet another reason the old wizard was so fond of her.

Ashelia's confidence in Boncyard was not misplaced. The seasoned sailor knew the condition of the boat from the feel of the tiller and the tug of the sails, and though she had to work hard to keep Boncyard moving along her desired course, they made the secret inlet and the quiet lagoon quite comfortably—and would have, even if Ashelia had not kept poor Spragan and Lathan bailing all the way.

Not many people knew about that place—just a few of Caer-Dincval's fishermen, and Roundabout, of course, who knew the wilderness around the three lakes better than anyone in Ten-Towns. A solitary dock stuck out from the lagoon beach, with a single-roomed cottage behind it, and that in front of a small but thick forest. That alone was a remarkable thing, for most of Lac Dinncsherc was bordered by rocky bluffs and barren tundra. But the bluffs both north and south were a bit higher than usual, shielding the wood. The forest, second in size in Iccwind Dale only to Lonclywood on the banks of Maer Dualdon far to the west, like the dock and cabin, was a well-kept secret.

Larson's Boncyard glided in easily under Ashelia's skilled hand, with Lathan and Spragan stumbling around to secure the ropes.

"Water's not deep," Ashelia explained.

"I can see the bottom!" Spragan confirmed.

"Even if she fills, she's not for sinking here, so we can patch her and bail her, and get back out in short order," said Ashelia. "Tools, tar, and planks in the cabin."

"A resourceful lot, you fisherfolk," Addadearbcr congratulated her.

“Not all,” Ashelia replied. “But them that ain’t are dead, or soon to be. Lac Dinncshere’s not forgivin’ to fools.”

With Addadearber’s magical assistance heating some tar and blowing aside water in the hold so that Ashelia could set the patch plank in place, it didn’t take long to make the minor repair, but since the sun was low in the west, they decided to stay the rest of the day and that night ashore.

“Pick some good ones for our supper,” the captain told her young crewmcmbcrs. “Then bail her down below the patch so we can sec if she’s holding and go out and get us firewood for ‘ the night.”

She left the two young men to their tasks and moved to the dock and the shore, to find the wizard and the ranger staring into the forest, perplexed.

“What do ye know, then?” she asked.

“It’s a good season,” Roundabout replied, indicating the forest. As she followed his gaze, Ashelia understood what he meant. The wood looked thicker and more vibrant than she remembered, and the air was full of the scent of flowering plants and the sounds of forest life.

Ashelia wore the most puzzled look of all. “Was here in the autumn,” she explained. “Something’s different. It’s bigger.”

“A trick of the Spellplague?” Addadearber posited. “Some magic gone awry, perhaps.”

“Everything is about magic with you, wizard,” Roundabout said, drawing an arc of one of Addadearber’s bushy eyebrows. “It was a good winter, full of snow, and the melt

has been consistent,” the ranger added. “Even here in the dale, life finds a way to flourish.”

“Because we’re a resourceful lot,” Ashelia added and started for the cabin, the other two moving in her wake.

And none of them convinced by Roundabout’s argument that nothing unusual was going on, the ranger least of all. They could feel it, like a heartbeat in the ground beneath their feet. They could smell it and could hear it, a vibrancy in the air.

They did a bit of cleaning—the ranger scooped out the fire pit—and organized the cabin’s small table and chairs, and claimed a piece of the floor for their respective beds. Lathan and Sptagan joined them shortly, arms laden with fish, knucklehead trout mostly, but with an assortment of blues and spotted bass for variety.

“Seems to be holding,” Lathan reported.

Roundabout tossed him an axe he had found leaning against one wall.

“Enough for cooking and for keeping us warm through the night,” Ashelia instructed, and the two young sailors set out.

“I should get me a couple of those,” Addadearber remarked as they left.

“They can be helpful,” Ashelia agreed.

“More trouble than they’re worth,” the ranger said, and when the other two gave him amused looks, he added, “And no, I am not letting them ruin my meal with their no doubt impressive cooking skills.” He scooped up the largest of the

fish, pulled a knife from his belt and went outside to clean the thing.

With a waggle of his fingers, Addadearber animated a second fish and danced it out the door behind the ranger.

“Yc’re holding faith in yer magic, then,” said Ashelia. “Not many others’re doing the same.”

“Minor dweomers,” the wizard explained. “We cannot simply cease with our spellcasting, else we’ll never retrieve our skills when the Weave repairs.”

“If,” Ashelia corrected.

Addadearber conceded the point with a shrug. “And if it does not, we must adapt to whatever magic remains, or evolves. I employ my spells every day, and often. As magic shifts, I will watch and I will learn, while my less courageous colleagues will find themselves far behind me.”

“And Addadearber will take over the world!” Ashelia said, grinning widely. “Or Icewind Dale, at the least. Are ye worthy o’ that kingdom, wizard?”

“What ill have I done to deserve it?” Addadearber replied.

“My fingers are freezing. I can barely hold the thing!” Lathan complained, swinging the axe at the end of one arm.

“I’ll take it,” Spragan was quick to reply, but all he received in answer was a scowl.

“I’m older. You just collect the kindli□” Lathan stopped

short, confused when he glanced to his left to see that Spragan was no longer beside him on the trail, that the trail

itself was no longer the same as he remembered. He stood beside a stand of birch, but didn't remember passing it. "Spragan?" No answer.

Lathan looked all around, and the ground behind seemed strangely unfamiliar, though he had just crossed. When he turned back to look ahead, he saw a copse of thick trees crowded in front of him, with no sign of the trail.

"Spragan!" he called more loudly. He moved off quickly in one direction for a short bit then back the other way, then back the way he had come.

"Spragan!"

"What?" his younger friend answered from right beside him, so suddenly Lathan nearly swung the axe at him. "What's the matter?" Spragan asked.

Lathan shook his head. "Let's get done and get out of here."

Spragan looked at him as though he had no idea what Lathan might be talking about, but he shrugged and indicated a nearby hillside where several older trees had shed their branches. "Kindling," he announced, and started away.

Lathan took a deep breath and berated himself for showing such irrational cowardice in front of the younger boy. He took up the axe with grim determination, sighted a nearby young elm, and decided that a bit of exercise and axe-swinging might be just what he needed to settle his nerves.

He hoisted the axe in both his hands, wringing the cold out of them, as he strode purposefully toward his goal. As he neared, he glanced back to make sure that Spragan remained in sight.

He couldn't see his friend. He couldn't even seem to locate the hillside Spragan had indicated, though he hadn't traveled more than a dozen steps.

Lathan gripped the axe more tightly.

Spragan suffered no such reservations or uneasy feelings. He danced through the thick underbrush and among the many wildflowers, gathering twigs and small branches. It had been a long day and he was hungry. He licked his lips repeatedly, almost tasting the trout in anticipation.

He bent down to a shrub and picked up an old, dry, long-dead branch, eyes widening as he thought his job might be done with but one catch. He propped the branch against a tree and kicked at its center, breaking it in half, then bent to retrieve one of the pieces so he could break it again.

He froze halfway down, seeing that he was not alone.

She smiled at him as only a young girl could, bright and beaming, and with a shake of her head that sent her long auburn hair dancing over her child's shoulders. Her dress, too, caught his attention, for it seemed so out of place, inadequate against the chill winds of Icewind Dale. White and full of ruffles, it seemed more a gown fitting for a grand ball in Bryn Shander than something one would wear into the forest. Even the black cloak tied around her shoulders appeared more fashionable than warm.

"What are you doing out ... Who are you?" Spragan sputtered.

The girl smiled and stared at him.

"Do you live here?"

She giggled and dashed behind a tree.

Spragan dropped the branch and rushed to follow her, but when he went around the tree, she was nowhere to be seen.

She was behind him! He sensed it without turning. Spragan jumped forward a step and whirled around.

It was her, but it wasn't her, the girl before him was his age, at least.

And she took his breath away. She had to be the older sister of the child he'd just seen, with her bright smile, flowing

reddish-brown hair, and blue eyes—so blue he seemed to sink right into them as he stared at her. But it wasn't her older sister, Spragan sensed. It was the same girl, only older, and dressed the same. Confused, the poor young man reached for her arm.

His hand went right through her as she vanished, just faded to nothingness.

A young girl's giggle had him spinning back around, and there she was, right there, and no older than eight.

And she was gone again. A woman's laughter turned him once more, and she was as old as his mother, though still incredibly beautiful..

A young girl again. A teenager, like him. A child once more. A woman, no more a girl. An old crone ... One after another they appeared to him, all around him, laughing—laughing at him!—and turning him this way and that. Poor Spragan jumped around, then tried to sprint away, stumbling down the hillside.

Singing filled the air around him, sweet and melancholy, and peppering him with a range of emotions. He tried to pick up speed, but stumbled again then caught himself fast against one tree and skidded to an abrupt halt as he used it to turn around.

And she was there, right in front of him, a woman again, perhaps twenty-five years of age. She wasn't singing anymore, and wasn't smiling, her face tight, her eyes intense. Spragan shrank back from her, but his legs wouldn't heed his command to run.

The woman breathed deeply, her arms lifting to her sides, her form blurring suddenly as the air around her shimmered with some unknown energy. Her hair blew back and fluttered wildly, though there was no wind, and her layered gown did likewise as she rose up tall before him—no, not tall, he realized to his horror! She floated in the air! And purple flames erupted all around her, and her eyes rolled up into her head, showing only white.

Spragan gave a cry of horror and hot winds buffeted him and flung him to the ground.

“Who are you?” he cried, scrambling to his knees.

The wind came on more furiously, carrying twigs that nicked at him as they flew past, and sand that stung his eyes and reddened his face. He rose against the blow and turned.

She was still there, floating in the air, flames dancing around her, hair flying wildly.

Then she was a little girl again, but no less ominous—indeed more threatening as her eyes rolled back to show blue, and her mouth opened wide in a sinister hiss.

Spragan ran past her, and he was half-running and half-flying as the wind gripped him and rushed him along. He cried out and tried to duck, but too late. Even though he managed to lift an arm, it served as little defense as he smashed into a low branch and was thrown onto his back.

The ground below him reverberated with music, like a heartbeat, and the air hummed with the woman's song.

Words flitted through poor Spragan's mind: "ghost" ... "banshee" ... But whatever it was, whatever she was, he knew beyond doubt that he was doomed. Though dazed, his nose broken, he tried to run on, blood filling his mouth, tears dulling his vision.

But she was there at every turn, young or old, and terribly beautiful.

So terribly beautiful.

Lathan set the axe between his feet, spat in both his hands, and gripped the handle tightly. He gave a growl as he lifted the axe back over his right shoulder, lining up his first strike on the young elm tree, but he had to pause when the axe brushed the branch of a nearby pine.

Lathan looked at it curiously, wondering how he hadn't noticed it was so close. With a shrug, he shifted a step to the side and hoisted the axe once more.

A gust of wind hit him just as he began his swing, and the pine beside him swayed in the sudden breeze, and again his axe clipped through needled branches as it came forth, and before it could gain any momentum, it got hooked on one of those branches and held fast.

“What the—?” Lathan asked aloud as he turned to regard the tree.

Then the wind began to blow more furiously, and the pine danced as wildly as Lathan’s blond hair. Stubbornly he tugged at the axe, but the tree held it fast.

“No, you don’t!” he growled in defiance, and with a great tug, he tore the axe free. Before the wind could interfere again, he turned and swung at the elm.

But the tree was faster, bending low and to the side, sweeping past him with a great whoosh, and as Lathan tried to continue his swing, he found his legs pulled out from under him, throwing him facedown to the ground, the axe bouncing from his grasp. And still the tree wound back, pulling the caught Lathan with it, though he clawed desperately at the ground to stop his slide.

Finally he did stop, and he rolled, trying to free his foot.

The wind stopped as abruptly as it had come up, and that seemed a good thing to Lathan only as long as it took him to realize that he was caught in the branch of a rather tall pine tree that was bent rather low.

He managed to gasp before the rush of the tree’s return swing snatched him up and took his breath away, lifting him high and fast into the air, only to let him go at exactly the right moment.

Screaming, spinning, flailing wildly and helplessly, Lathan flew through the forest. Every instant, he cringed, thinking he

was about to splatter against a tree or branch, but each time he somehow missed, as if the forest was getting out of his

way.

On he flew, out of the forest, and below him. Roundabout looked up, mouth agape. Over the boat and the docks he went, out to the waters of Lac Oinneshcre, where he landed with a great splash.

“Ashelia! Wizard!” Roundabout cried, sprinting to the boat to grab a rope or something to throw to the lad, who flailed in the water some thirty feet out from the dock.

The two came out of the cabin just as a second missile soared overhead, much higher and farther than Lathan. Easily a hundred feet out from the dock, the woodsman’s axe splashed into the waters of Lac Dinneshere.

Roundabout’s very first throw of the rope proved perfect, but still it took them some time to pull the shivering, terrified Lathan from the frigid water.

“Get him inside afore his toes fall off!” Ashelia instructed.

“Spragan! Where is Spragan?” Addadearber yelled at the wailing young man.

They hustled him off the dock, and before they even reached the cabin. Addadearber had his answer. Rushing out of the forest, crying and screaming, waving his arms as if a hive of bees were right behind him, came poor Spragan, his face all cut and bloody, his jacket shredded, one shoe missing. He fell to the ground, obviously not for the first time, and Roundabout ran to him.

Spragan screamed and tried to flee.

The ranger called out his name in comforting tones and tried to reach for him in an unthreatening manner, but Spragan

howled all the louder, and thrashed as if fighting for his very life against a horde of demons. He tried to run away, but got his feet all tangled and fell down again.

Roundabout was on him in an instant, expertly tying him up in a paralyzing hold, one that put the ranger's mouth near to Spragan's ear, where he whispered reassurances.

But if the boy heard him, he didn't show it, and just began wailing, "She's going to eat me! She's going to eat me!" over and over again.

Roundabout glanced at the dark forest, then set his feet under him and hauled himself and the boy up, keeping the lad's arms fully locked all the way. With superior strength, he lifted Spragan right from the ground so that he couldn't dig in his heels and get any leverage to tug free.

But by then, the boy had fallen limp anyway, sobbing quietly and whispering every so often that he didn't want to die.

A short while later, Addadearbcr and Roundabout stood beside the cabin, staring into the forest. Behind them, the sun reached in long rays across Lac Dinneshere.

"I see more intrigue than trepidation on your face, wizard," Roundabout remarked after a long silence.

"Magic," the wizard answered. "Lots of it."

"Felt it when we first got here," the ranger agreed. "Do you know the name of this place?"

"Didn't know it had a name."

“Only the barbarian tribes know it,” Roundabout explained. “They named it Iruladoon long, long ago, before Ten-Towns, when the elves were thick in Icewind Dale.”

“I’ve not heard that word before.”

“Old Elvish word,” Roundabout explained. “It translates to ‘a place without time.’ I expect the barbarians thought it appropriate because the long-lived elves didn’t seem to age.”

“Spragan talked about a girl, a woman, in various stages of age all at once. Might it be that there’s more to the naming of Iruladoon than simpleton barbarians being confused by long-lived elves?”

“You want to find out, of course,” Roundabout remarked.

“I’ve devoted my whole life to the Art,” Addadearber replied. “It is my religion, my hope that there is something more beyond this pitiful, short existence we’re offered. And now I, like so many of my colleagues, have watched the collapse of all that we hold dear. I stand before a place of magic—that much is assured. Does it hold some answers? Some hope? I know not, but know that I am bound by my faith to find out.”

“The wood’s not wanting visitors,” Roundabout reminded him.

Addadearber nodded. “I have a spell that will allow me passage. I fear to use it, but I shall. And you, of course, believe that you can enter Iruladoon.”

Roundabout nodded, and with a grin to his companion, the ranger pulled up his hood.

“Should we wait until morning?” the wizard asked.

“I prefer the dark,” Roundabout replied with a wink of his blue eye.

The ranger moved to the trees at a careful pace. He paused for just a moment when he reached the tree line then nodded and disappeared into the forest.

Addadearber cast a minor spell upon himself and squinted into the shadows, ensuring that his spell had worked to enhance his lowlight vision. Then he paused and prepared himself for the more potent, and thus, far more dangerous, dweomer. Not long ago, the enchantment had been a routine thing to powerful Addadearber, but since the advent of the Spcllplague, he hadn't dared attempt it. Reports from all over FacrCtn spoke of wizards permanently trapped inside one of their own spells, and Addadearber didn't find that prospect particularly appealing.

But the forest beckoned him, the promise of revelation. He gave a short puff, blowing out all of his doubts, and immediately launched into casting. Arms waving, he chanted furiously,

throwing all of his power into the dweomer, reminding himself of the potential consequences of failure.

He turned black head to toe. Not a darker hue, but absolute black, seeming almost dimensionless in his monotone color. Then he flattened, parchment thin, as the wraithform took full hold.

Addadearber didn't breathe in his undead form, but if he did, he would be breathing easier, to be sure. Roundabout had gone into Iruladoon cautiously, but the wizard needed no such care. Jot in that form, where he could slip silently and unnoticed from deepening shadow to deepening shadow.

As if carried on a stiff breeze, a parchment blowing in the wind, Addadearber soared up and between the lines of trees.

He sensed Roundabout as he glided past the creeping man, who stiffened and sniffed and glanced all around, but never caught on to Addadearber's passing. With great speed, he managed the entire perimeter of Iruladoon before the onset of twilight, coming back to the same area where he had first entered the wood. Then he went in deeper, following no path but his own instincts, weaving silently and invisibly in the darkening night.

His eyes flashed as he crested one hill, for there, in the distance, he saw a campfire. As he neared it, he noted that it was on the edge of a small pond. Behind it and to the side, a circular door had been set against the face of an earthen mound—the type of house he had seen in halfling communities. And so he was not surprised when exactly that, a halfling with curly brown hair and a disarming, easy stride walked out from behind the house, a fishing pole over one shoulder and his other thumb hooked under one of the red suspenders that held up his breeches, which in turn held up his rather ample belly.

Addadearber held back and let the little one set the pole upon forked stick he had set in the bank, though he didn't bother to cast his line just then. He went back to his fire and assembled a tripod, upon which he hung a sizable pot. Then he went to the

pond with a bucket. Apparently soup or stew was on the menu for that night.

Satisfied that there was nothing amiss about the place, and likely no one else about, the wizard closed his eyes and released his dwcomcr. He felt only a few short instances of

tingling pain as his body expanded to its three-dimensional proportions.

He allowed himself a deep sigh of relief.

"You call this place home?" the wizard asked, startling the halfling.

The little one turned to regard the man with curiosity. "You shouldn't be here," he said, obvious alarm in his voice. "This is not your place."

"But I am here, and I am not pleased."

The halfling cocked his head, and if he was concerned by the wizard's tone, he did not show it. "Do you know who I am?" The halfling shook his head. "I am Addadearber of the Lightning!" The halfling shrugged.

"I am the chief mage of Caer-Dineval, the mightiest wizard of Icewind Dale," Addadearber declared.

That seemed to pique the little one's interest, as his mouth formed the words "Icewind Dale" incredulously.

"The mightiest!" the impatient wizard reiterated.

The halfling wore a wry smile and glanced around. "I doubt that."

"And that is why I am here. A couple of my friends were ill-treated by the forest you call home—or by some wizard within. They were expelled, brutally, and by magic."

"They did not belong here."

"You say that a lot."

“For your own, and for their own, benefit,” the halfling explained. “This is not a place for visitors. You should leave.”

“Little one, do not anger me. You will not enjoy the spectacle of an angry Addadearber. I will leave when I decide ...”

Before he could properly finish the thought, a large fish broke the water near the bank beside him and slapped its tail at just an angle to send a spray of water over him.

The wizard glared at the water, then at the halfling. “You did that!” he accused.

He got splashed again, then again.

“No,” the giggling halfling said. “They don’t answer to me. If they did, I wouldn’t need my pole.”

“You try my patience!” Addadearber said when he was splashed yet again. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. There were things here he wanted to learn about, and certainly not in an adversarial way.

“Who are you?” he asked, calm.

The halfling shrugged.

“How long have you lived in Iruladoon?”

“Iruladoon?”

“This place. How long?”

Again, the halfling shrugged. “Time has little meaning here. Months? Years? I don’t know.” “And what do you do?”

“I fish. I sculpt—have you an interest in scrimshaw?” He turned and indicated the round door of his home. The wizard

got splashed again.

“And you instruct your forest to treat visitors in an ill manner,” Addadearber said. The halfling laughed at that, and as another wave of water sprayed Addadearber, the wizard pointed accusingly and stepped forward to warn, “Do not ever mock me!”

To his surprise, the little one didn’t shrink back in the least, but just stood there looking at him, curious, shaking his head. Normally when Addadearber voiced such a proclamation, mothers took their children off the streets and great warriors

quivered, and char injustice, that little halfling looking at him with something akin to pity, was more than he could take.

“You insignificant ant! I could reduce you to ash with a mere thought!”

The halfling glanced to the side, to the waters of the lake, and sighed, and returned his gaze to Addadearber with a finger held up over pursed lips and a warning of, “Shh.”

“What?” Addadearber replied then he, too, looked at the lake, and his eyes widened. There, just offshore, the water churned in a wide circle, silent at first but then growing strong enough so that waves cupped over and splashed around the growing whirlpool.

“You really should leave,” the halfling said.

“I came here to learn,” the wizard replied, trying hard to keep the rising fear out of his voice. “The world is troubled—magic is ill. My goddess has gone silent.”

"I know more about that than you ever will, I fear," the halfling interrupted.

"Then you must tell me everything."

"Go away. For your own sake, wizard, leave this place and do not return."

"No!" Addadearber yelled above the rising tumult of the churning water. "Enough of your games and tricks! I will have my answers!"

He got one, then and there, as a sudden and unseen wind slammed him in the side, throwing his hat far and wide, and throwing him behind it, arms and legs flapping. He splashed hard against the side of the whirlpool and was swept up in its mighty current. Around and around he went, splashing futilely to try to get out of the vortex.

He called out to the halfling, who just stood there on the bank, thumbs hooked under his suspenders, a resigned and pitying look on his face.

Down went Addadearber, lower and lower against the unrelenting press of the water. Dizzy and disoriented, the strength leaving his arms, he could not resist, and was plunged under. He came up only once, sputtering a garbled curse at the halfling, then he disappeared.

The halfling sighed as the water flattened to a nearly dead calm once more, the placid trout pond looking as if nothing had happened.

Except for the hat. Out in the middle of the pond, the wizard's floppy, conical hat bobbed on the few remaining ripples.

The halfling grabbed his fishing pole. He always prided himself on his ability to cast a line.

Roundabout crept through the trees, his appreciation for the strange forest growing with every step. He hadn't been through Iruladoon for more than a year, and since then it had changed entirely. A year past it had been a cold pine forest trying to find root in the harsh environs of Icewind Dale, with sparse, seasonal underbrush and a short flowering season. But the forest had indeed changed. He could sense it. The vibrancy of life there could not be ignored; the colors, smells, and sounds filled the air with a sort of heartbeat, a sensation, a vibration or sound, under his feet, a cadence for the rhythms of nature. There was a uniquely divine energy to it, tingling all around him.

The sun disappeared in the west and the forest grew dark, but the half-elf didn't fear the place. His hands did not slip near the hilts of his sheathed sword and dirk.

The heartbeat—music, in a sense—grew. Roundabout felt the power as if its source was approaching him.

“Where are you, wizard?” he whispered to the empty air.

The forest went preternaturally silent, and Roundabout held his breath.

And then he saw her, through the trees not far away, a woman

in a white gown and with a black cloak, dancing carefree through the trees. Compelled, he followed, and he wound up lying on a mossy embankment beneath a stand of pines, staring out at a small meadow where the barefoot witch danced in starlight.

Roundabout lost his heart at that moment, for never had he seen any woman quite so beautiful and graceful. He couldn't even blink, fearing to lose the image before him even momentarily. He wouldn't let it go. He couldn't let it go.

She danced and she twirled and she sang, and her voice was the song of Iruladoon.

She was the wizard that had enchanted the wood,
Roundabout was certain.

Or the goddess ... and that thought had the ranger holding his breath once more, had his hands trembling and sweating, and no one who knew Roundabout had ever seen him in such a state.

She stopped her dance and her song, and brushed her thick auburn hair back from in front of her face, revealing eyes so blue that even the night could not dull their inviting luster.

Roundabout shifted uncomfortably. He knew logically that she could not see him, and yet there was no doubt in his mind that she looked at him directly. He thought he should stand and introduce himself, and explain himself.

But he couldn't move. His legs would not answer his call to stand. His mouth refused to form the words to call out to her.

She smiled and shook her head then spun into her dance again, twirling around and around, faster and faster, until she was but a blur of flowing robes. And from that she leaped, as if upon the starlight itself.

And she was gone.

Gone from the meadow, but not from the mind of Roundabout. He saw her still, he clutched the image. He

never wanted to let it go. He never wanted to look at anything else ever again. Just her, forever her. In that dancing creature, that witch,

or ghost, or goddess. Roundabout had witnessed the perfection of nature itself.

He managed to mouth the name “Miclikki,” and recognized, albeit briefly, that he wasn’t lying down any longer, but had regained his feet.

Then he saw her again, in his mind or in front of him—it mattered not—dancing under the stars.

Addadearber came up with a gasp and a wild splash, sucking in air. His lungs ached and he desperately gulped more air. It took him a long time to even hear Ashelia calling to him from the bank near the dock, only a few feet from him.

He managed to get there and crawl out of the lake, trembling with fear and shivering with cold.

“How in the Nine Hells ... ?” the woman asked.

Addadearber shook his head, considering the whirlpool and the tunnel of water that had flushed him from Iruladoon, right back into the small lagoon. It made no sense, even to a man who had flown in the empty air, who had turned enemies into frogs, and who created lightning and fire out of thin air.

“Well, what do yc know?” Ashelia asked, helping him from the water.

But Addadearber could only wag his head and sputter.

Almost at the same moment. Roundabout walked out of the forest, his step light, his eyes glassy, and he seemed not even to recognize them or notice any of his surroundings.

“Roundabout!” Ashelia called, and she let go of the wizard and ran to the ranger.

He looked at her as though unable to understand her alarm. Then he looked all around, at the cabin and the lake, at the dock and Larson’s Bontyard tied up against it. His face screwed up with puzzlement, and he shrugged.

“They attacked me!” Addadearber insisted, storming up to the pair. “I will burn that forest to the ground!”

“If you raise a torch or a spell against it, I will kill you,” Roundabout replied, and both Ashelia and Addadearber gasped.

“Ranger!” the fishcrwoman scolded.

“We have to leave this place,” Roundabout said, retracting not a bit of his threat.

“We’re sailing in the morning.”

“We’re sailing now,” the ranger corrected.

“We? I thought you were to remain on this bank,” Addadearber said with a sharp tone, obviously unhappy with the threat. “With your friends who haunt the forest, perhaps?”

“Shut up, wizard.” Roundabout turned to Ashelia. “To Lac Dinneshere, all of us, and now.”

“Spragan’s still stupid, and Lathan’s still hurting,” Ashelia argued.

“I will row or tack, then, and so will Addadearber.”

“You have grown quite bold,” the wizard warned.

But Roundabout only smiled, and glanced back at Iruladoon. He had seen her. The witch, the ghost, the goddess—with that celestial image still fresh in his mind, there was little the blustering Addadearber could say that could bother him.

Unless the wizard did indeed try to turn his anger, magic or mundane, at the forest.

Roundabout smiled, hardly believing his own heart, for he knew that in that instance, he truly would kill the man.

They put out from the dock soon after, all glad to be gone from the haunted forest.

All, except for Roundabout, who knew that he wasn’t really leaving, that he took a piece of Iruladoon with him, and would hold it forever more.

For he would never allow himself to forget the dance of the goddess, and her ladder of starlight.